



NARISE KONOHARA
NANAO SAIKAWA



Yaoi



Novel

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“Uh, now, wait just... just a—”

But even as he said this, something cool was pressed against his lips. Tohru pulled his head away forcibly, but was quickly drawn near, and lips were gently pressed to his. Fujishima was drunk beyond the point of discrimination. Even as Tohru struggled like a fly caught in a spider's web, he returned the kisses at Fujishima's request. Twice, three times, four times... it didn't feel bad, even though he knew he was dealing with another man. To be honest, the touch of his lips was pleasant.

After losing his memory in a serious car accident, Tohru Takahisa is taken in by Fujishima, an older man who claims to be his friend. But the taciturn Fujishima refuses to reveal anything about Tohru's past! Despite the gulf between them, a strange and awkward tenderness grows, even as they are held apart by the tragic events of Tohru's forgotten past! Dramatic, heart-wrenching romance and tragedy combine in a gripping story where the past and present are intricately entwined. This volume also contains the short story “Class Reunion” and an all-new sequel!



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Contents

Cold Sleep8

Class Reunion167

The One I Love191

Afterword.....218

Cold Sleep

“If someone took a vacuum cleaner to every nook and cranny in my head,” thought Tohru Takahisa, “I wonder if it would feel like this. Who am I...what am I? No matter how much I think about it, nothing comes up. It’s like the inside of my head is a piece of art board before someone draws on it, all blank white.”

The area was empty. It was a living room, but it had the desolate air of a freight warehouse thanks to the cardboard boxes that were simply piled up in the corners, as if substantiating the words of a man who said he’d just moved in.

He could see the dark night through the curtainless windows. The A/C started up with a faint activation hum. The cold breeze, not yet warmed up, blew against his cheek, and his back automatically flinched. The man put the bags containing Tohru’s things by the wall, then disappeared into the forward-facing kitchen. On the carpet, unable even to remove his coat, Tohru vacantly pursued the man’s retreating form. The man was silent as usual. Before coming here, they’d had dinner at a family restaurant, but even then, an oppressive silence had hung in the air as if they were at a wake. Since there had been noise all around them, he’d found their silence to be most worrisome. However,

perhaps he was the only one who’d minded; as usual, the man’s face was expressionless, so Tohru couldn’t tell what he was thinking. He’d regarded various people as talkative or not, but even compared to people he’d generally considered “silent,” this man spoke extremely few words.

He’d left the hospital about two hours ago. Things had run late in matching up with when the man’s work was over. At first he’d waited for the man in his hospital room, but late in the afternoon, he’d retired to the waiting room. He’d watched the TV to kill time, but the familiar face of the nurse had popped into the entrance and said, “Oh, Mr. Takahisa. I wondered if you’d already checked out and gone home.”

“My ride won’t be here until after seven. It seems there were more patients, so I was chased out of my room,” he responded with a painful smile.

As it passed 6 p.m., he caught the delicious aromas of the dinners being distributed in the hospital, and his stomach growled. As he wondered nervously if the man was going to show up soon, the nurse—now out of uniform, perhaps on her way home for the night—poked her head in again, said, “Here, don’t tell anyone,” and slipped him some tea-cake pastries.

“It’ll be lonely here when you check out, Mr. Takahisa. Old Mr. Ikegami’s all depressed. He thinks of you as a grandson.”

The elderly Mr. Ikegami, who’d been hospitalized for a dislocated hip, was a cynical chatterbox, secretly known among the nurses as “the geezer.” Having been unlucky enough to get the bed

opposite him, Tohru had been a captive audience, forced to hear tales of the "Tumultuous Showa Years." Thanks to this, he could now recite the names of the old man's air force unit, of course, and even the names of his second son's grandchildren.

"But when I was leaving the room, he told me, 'Now I'll get some better ventilation in here.'"

Tohru was over five foot ten, and every time he'd passed in front of Mr. Ikegami, he'd gotten various complaints: "Quit blocking my sunlight," or "Now it's gloomy in here." The nurse would waggle her right index finger back and forth and tsk-tsk him.

"Yes, he did say spiteful things, but he likes you, Mr. Takahisa. People have asked to change rooms because they were fed up with having to listen to old Mr. Ikegami's stories, but you heard him out."

In fact, he simply hadn't been able to wrangle a room exchange very well.

The nurse grinned and gave Tohru a solid pat on the shoulder.

"The tough part may be ahead, but you're a good boy, so I think you'll be all right. Hang in there, young man."

He thought she was giving him too much credit, but appreciated her encouraging words. However, the anxiety that enveloped the inside of his heart like a thin film would not disappear. If he were released from the hospital, then there went the indulgences that came with being a patient. Even if his head never came back to normal, he would have to return to society. Even if he knew nothing, could do nothing.

The blare of a car horn brought him back to himself. While he'd been lost in reverie, the room had warmed up nicely. From the kitchen opposite him, he could hear the hissing bubble of hot water boiling.

He peered out through the window, wondering if he could find the source of the car horn, but it was too dark to see a thing. Reflected in the dark window glass on which the night was projected was the face of a young man he didn't know. Three months had gone by already, and he still couldn't get used to that face, the face of a twenty-two-year-old man named Tohru Takahisa. His own face. Yet in looking at it, he felt a cold distance, as if sneaking a peek at someone's photograph.

The creak of the wooden flooring made him turn his head to look back. The man was approaching with two mugs in his hands. The fragrant aroma of coffee drifted all through the dreary room. "Here," said the man, holding out one of the mugs.

"Thank you..."

It was mild and delicious, so unlike the vending machine coffee in the hospital. The man drew near the window and looked down on the pitch-black scenery outside, occasionally bringing his mug of coffee to his lips.

His name was Keishi Fujishima. He was twenty-eight years old and stood a good four inches shorter than Tohru. He was slender all over and had a small face with small features. Those features were regular but undistinguished because they were expressionless, offering no clue as to what he was thinking. His hair was always perfectly combed, his shirt spotless. Coupled



with his expressionless face, these gave an impression of someone cold and a little high-strung. However, one didn't get this feeling at all from the man's words and consideration for those around him. To be frank, he was unsociable, but one could readily believe that this didn't come out of coldness.

As Keishi stopped looking outside, his eyes met with Tohru's. Tohru quickly averted his gaze.

"I've prepared in your room what you'll need when making a living. Please don't hesitate to let me know if anything's missing."

"Um...thanks for everything, really."

In front of the grateful Tohru, Fujishima drank his coffee expressionlessly. "I'd feel easier if he'd say something like, 'Don't worry about it,' or 'I'm counting on you to return the favor,'" thought Tohru. As it was, he felt like his words were floating somewhere in the air, lonely. He often got that feeling when talking to the man.

His memories with Fujishima had begun about three months ago, yet he still felt some reservations about the man. Fujishima himself gave a sense of looking at himself from all around at a distance. Tohru was unable to recall any past scenes of having casual small talk with him. He knew they were junior and senior, but when Tohru could not understand the meaning of the blank whiteness in his head, Fujishima had told him, "You and I are friends."

"You look tired. You should get some rest."

He'd done nothing in particular all day today. He didn't think he was tired, but it suddenly occurred

to him that resting meant he could be alone, and he suddenly wanted out of this uncomfortable place.

"Okay, I'll be off to bed, then."

He gave a casual, light nod of his head, and Fujishima bowed his own head slightly in return. Before going to his room, he made to tidy up by taking the empty mugs into the kitchen. He didn't know how to use the faucet in the sink, so he washed off the mugs with cold water instead of hot. He thought his fingertips would freeze.

Slinging his luggage bag over his arm, he walked to the door he'd been told was to his room when he was first guided around the place, rubbing his hands together as he went. As he set foot into his room, he found it filled with a soft warmth like the beginning of spring. As Tohru kept standing vacantly in the dreary, six-mat room, which contained only a bed, he could hear the hum of the A/C working.

"Who am I?" he began asking himself. But the answer wasn't being kept in any of the drawers of his mind.

Three months ago, around the middle of August, there had been an accident. It had been a car accident, apparently. Since he could not remember anything, the stories he heard from others became vague expressions. He remembered waking up in the Intensive Care Unit, surrounded by numerous machines, and everything since then, but nothing before.

When he'd first opened his eyes after the accident, the nurse had asked for his name. He knew

he was being asked for "your name," but the crucial "name" had not come forth, and he had been unable to reply. The same held true for his age, his address, his job, and the names of his family. The inside of his head was blank, as if wiped over by an eraser.

He had been confused too, but the atmosphere around him had conveyed an even stronger bewilderment from the nurses and doctors. After a short while, a lone man had entered his hospital room. Tohru hadn't recognized his face. The man had looked down at him with a fixed expression, then turned to the doctor and declared, "There's no mistake. This man is Tohru Takahisa." Tohru Takahisa...Tohru Takahisa...even after hearing his own name, nothing had come to him. It was as if the name belonged to someone else.

He had cranial abrasions and damage to his right lung. His ribs and collarbone were fractured and his right arm dislocated. On top of all this, the cranial bruising had resulted in his amnesia. That was all the diagnosis that stuck with him. The wounds and broken bones he could see had almost completely healed in those three months, but his memories alone remained at the site of the accident where he'd lost them. Despite all the time that had passed, they had not returned.

He was frightened of his blank memory. Where had he been born? What sort of parents had raised him? What kind of friends had he had? What had his school life been like? What had he been doing, and what had he been planning to do...? He saw no path for himself, either before or behind, and it terrified him. His anxiety had grown, and he'd begun to take it out on others. "It

hurts not knowing anything!"

Then the young doctor who'd first brought him to the emergency hospital spoke to him, his eyes blinking slowly behind his glasses: "Judging from past cases of memory loss, there is no clear, definitive evidence of when your past memories will return. To put it in extreme terms, it could be tomorrow, or it could be twenty years from now. But instead of worrying about the past, why don't you think about the future? You're still young, Mr. Takahisa..."

"Go to hell," he'd thought. "Easy for you to say—you haven't lost your memory. I don't know what I like or hate, what my interests are...so how am I supposed to imagine a vision of my future? It's not like anything ever comes out of a null state..." That's what he'd wanted to say, but instead he'd just hung his head and bit his lip.

He hadn't stayed even a week at the first hospital to which he'd been brought. Fujishima had decided to get him transferred to another hospital because "There's a doctor I know there." He had not consulted Tohru in advance, but since Tohru had no reason to object, he'd done as the man said.

The entire time he'd been checked in, only Fujishima had come to see him.

Other than hearing stories about the past from Fujishima, who came to visit once a day like clockwork, he had no means of finding out about himself. However, the man on whom he was depending had become most taciturn, so constructing his past took a long time.

According to Fujishima's story of his personal

history, Tohru had lost his parents at an early age, had no siblings or close relatives—in short, he was completely alone in the world. He had graduated high school and was working as an express home delivery driver. He'd been fired from that job at the time of the accident and evicted from the apartment where he'd been living for nonpayment of rent. Tohru listened to the past spoken of so indifferently by the man, to the misfortunes that paraded by as if by prior arrangement, as if he were hearing the affairs of someone else entirely. He had no feeling that this was all about himself, at which point he only thought, "So I see." However, when his body had healed and he became aware of having checked out of the hospital, he abruptly became worried about his future life. The insurance on the car from his disabling accident would cover his hospitalization and treatment costs, Fujishima said. However, nothing was left over for paying anything else, such as the security deposit for renting a new apartment. Fujishima then handed him a tea envelope, saying it was valuable. It proved to contain a personal seal, an insurance certificate, and 30,000 yen. There was no cell phone, which was strange. "Didn't I have a cell phone on me?" he asked Fujishima.

"It was a company phone, so it was returned when you left your job," he was told. It seemed he had not carried a private phone. There was also no bankbook among the valuables, so it appeared he'd had no savings. Including the 3,650 yen that he'd had in his wallet at the time of the accident with the contents of the envelope, Tohru's entire worldly assets totalled 33,650 yen.

He considered whether to borrow future living

expenses from Fujishima, but it was difficult for him to bring up the subject of money. He had a friend he didn't remember. This friend had handled the necessary procedures for insurance, paying the hospital, etc. on his behalf, plus he'd come to see Tohru every day, so Tohru figured they'd become close. And yet, he was weary of measuring the distance between himself and this man drifting somewhere in aloofness.

One week before he'd left the hospital, Fujishima had suggested, "How about staying at my apartment for a while after you check out?" Initially thinking he was saved, Tohru then started worrying if it was all right, and so was unable to rejoice honestly. He knew Fujishima wasn't a bad man. On the contrary, he was almost too kind. And yet, the sense of incongruity he felt at chance moments troubled him greatly.

Tohru had wondered and asked if they couldn't be friendlier. "Where did we meet?"

After a silence so long that Tohru thought he was being ignored, Fujishima had replied, "We worked at the same part-time job." He'd tried to ask what kind of part-time job, but Fujishima had left the hospital room before he could speak, and so the story ended there. He'd wondered what he could have had in common with a man six years his senior, even if they had worked together...and now three months had passed, and he still had no idea.

Tohru's life in the hospital had lasted quite a while, and his internal clock had apparently been set to wake him at 6:30 a.m., when the nurse started her rounds

for drawing blood. Even here, he woke up at that same time, looked up at the clock on the wall and smiled. The room was nice and warm, and he didn't want to leave the cozy bed, but as he secluded himself in the sheets and drowsed, there came a sharp knock at the room's door. Startled, Tohru shot out of bed. It was 7:30 a.m. He remembered he was in someone's home, not the hospital, and ran to the door, lamenting his untidy state.

Fujishima stood there smoothly in a dark gray suit, his hair perfectly arranged. Tohru unconsciously straightened out of his slouch. He became ashamed of having just woken up and still being in his rumpled pajamas.

"I'm leaving for work. I should be back at 7:30." Having said that, Fujishima handed Tohru a 10,000-yen bill, folded double, and a key. "Here's the key to the place. And if you get hungry, get something to eat with this."

Tohru unconsciously pulled back. "I can't take that. It's way too much!"

"If there's any left over, you can buy necessities."

Pressing the money into Tohru's hand, Fujishima departed. Even after all signs of him were gone, an unvoiceable awkwardness remained. Just buying a little juice or a sandwich when his hospital meals weren't enough had depleted Tohru's on-hand funds by about half. The remaining money would feed him for a month at best. He knew it might come to this sooner or later, but... accepting handouts like this gnawed at his pride as a man.

He couldn't let things stay this way. He couldn't let himself slowly become indebted to this man. His wounds from the accident were healed; even if he still had amnesia, he could get around. He could work well enough. Slapping himself on the right cheek and gathering his nerve, Tohru stepped out of the room. In the washroom, he cleaned his face and then shaved off his whiskers with the T-shaped razor he'd used while in the hospital. Feeling refreshed, he returned to his room, changed into jeans and a shirt, and put on his coat. Grasping the key tightly in his right hand, he left the apartment. Looking down from the passage in front of the entry hall, he saw a park right behind the building, something he had missed in the darkness last night. It was as spacious as a grade-school schoolyard.

He took the elevator to the first floor and walked out of the building. After an excessive look both ways, he crossed the street and entered the park. A footpath encircled the large lake in its center, and all around were sandboxes, swings, and objets d'art. Under a gazebo near the lake, two young mothers with children in tow were having what seemed to be an enjoyable chat.

Leaving the park and cutting across the street, he spotted a shopping district with an arcade. It appeared to be an old shopping district, and the look of the stores was fairly retro, but it was still early in the morning, so they were all still closed, their shutters drawn down. Passing through the shopping district, he came upon a subway station. Beyond that was a bookstore. In the distance, he could see a drugstore billboard.

Tohru strolled about the area, frequently turning

around to confirm the location of Fujishima's apartment building. If he got lost, that would be the end—he'd never be able to get back. He didn't know the apartment's phone number or address. If he didn't know the way home, even if he ran to a police call box, he wouldn't be able to tell them more than his name and age. The cold winter wind whipped past his ears. He hunched over and stuck his fingers in his coat pockets.

Uneasy about going too far, he turned back after reaching the front of the drugstore. As he walked along, his stomach let forth a growl. "Man, I'm hungry," he thought, walking along the outside of the park. With perfect timing, he spotted a convenience store diagonally across the way. Standing in front of the store as though it were pulling him in, Tohru noticed a "Help Wanted" ad pasted on the wall and gazed at it for a while, long enough to make the clerk inside inadvertently look at his face.

Fujishima returned home before eight that evening. Entering the living room with a tired expression, he called out "I'm home" to Tohru, who was watching TV, then put a plastic bag from the convenience store on the two-person dining table.

"I bought us dinner. I'm going to change, so go ahead and start without me." Having said that, he left the room. Tohru removed the contents of the bag and laid them out on the table so dinner could begin right after the man returned. There were two full box lunches with side dishes and two PET bottles of tea. True to the typical bachelor, it seemed Fujishima didn't do cooking himself.

Having changed clothes, Fujishima returned and ate his meal in silence, attempting no conversation. Once he'd finished eating, he did some simple tidying up to throw away the empty containers in the garbage can, then immediately started to leave the living room. Confused, Tohru called out to stop him. "Hey, can I ask you something real quick?"

Fujishima returned to the dining table, sat in a chair, looked at the document spread out by Tohru and muttered the single word "resume..."

"I've decided to get a part-time job at the convenience store by the park. It's a night job, though. Anyway, they told me to hand in a resume, and I'll be bringing this in tomorrow, but since I can't remember... Do I have to give them the name of my elementary school too?"

The man stared at the resume for a while, saying nothing.

"Grade school isn't necessary. High school and previous employers should do it."

"High school, huh...?" Unable to recall, Tohru sighed.

"Shouyou Municipal Academy."

"That's the name of the high school you went to."

Fujishima turned to face Tohru and put out his right hand. Flustered, Tohru handed him the ballpoint pen, and he wrote the name of the high school and all employers up to three months ago in small, angular letters on the back of the pasteboard included with the resume. Tohru transcribed these while referring to the

sample sentences entered in the resume set.

"Why did you decide to get a part time job at the convenience store?" Fujishima's tone was not severe, yet there seemed to be an air of reproach to it.

"Because it's close by and I should be able to earn money right away. I'd feel bad being indebted to you all the time, and I want to save some money..."

"You don't have to worry about money." The man's voice was hard.

"But I don't want to rely on just someone else's favors. Later on, if it's okay, could I go ahead and straighten up those cardboard boxes when I've got a free moment?"

"You don't have to do things like that."

"So there IS stuff there I shouldn't just open on my own?"

"I didn't call you here to make you tidy up the room. You don't have to do a thing about this place. Just worry about yourself."

He understood Fujishima respected and was considerate of him. And yet it would be a weight off his mind as a freeloader if he could get Fujishima to say, "Sure, go ahead."

"I'll have afternoons free, and I'll be restless if I don't do something."

Isn't there anything I can just do on my own?"

Fujishima knitted his brow and made a sullen face. This was merely putting it out of the way. Deep down, Tohru wondered if he didn't think this was a serious matter. After a silence, the man finally opened his severe mouth.



"If it'll satisfy you, do what you want. Just never think of what you do around the apartment as 'your obligation.'"

Being employed at the convenience store was great, although the midnight-to-8:00 a.m. shift was rough at first. He would walk home along the side of the park with its chirping birds, moving against the flow of departing salarymen, go into his room and immediately collapse on the bed. Towards dusk, he would wake up and begin his activities. He felt like he'd turned into Dracula or something, but his body adapted to this night life in about a week.

Tohru said nothing to his boss or co-workers about his memory loss. He didn't want them sympathizing or getting weirdly interested.

He made friends with Masahiko Kusuda, a fellow part-time worker who specialized in the same graveyard shift. Kusuda was a college student only two years younger than him. When they got to exchanging words frequently, he was often asked such questions as "Where are you from, Takahisa?" or "What clubs did you attend in high school?" At first he vaguely dodged the questions, but since he also disliked lying to hide things, he confided in Kusuda, prefacing it with, "Don't tell this to anyone else."

At first, Kusuda thought he was joking and laughed it off. "Yeah, go on and pull the other one." Tohru didn't mind not being believed and didn't confirm anything, but three days after their talk, Kusuda raised the subject again with, "Was all that stuff for real?"

Kusuda didn't sympathize over Tohru's amnesia. He never said a word along the lines of "You poor guy," but instead took interest in it because "It's like something out of a movie!" Since Tohru always saw an irritated face around home, it was a relief to have someone accept the matter cheerfully rather than seriously.

That evening, he and Kusuda were once again paired up for the night shift. Unlike the daytime, there weren't many customers at night, but there was still much to do, like cleaning the store, arranging the stock, and switching out the merchandise on the shelves. Taking turns moving rapidly around the store became a bother too, and he and Kusuda both sat inside the checkout counter area, just spacing out. Kusuda snuck some of the store's manga stock behind the counter and flipped through them one after another in the security camera's blind spot.

"Say, Takahisa, you'll be working this job even on New Year's Eve, right?"

"Mmm. Since the manager asked me if I would."

"I did that last year. From New Year's Eve to the third day of the year, it's murder. You've got people coming back from the first temple visit of the year or going to see the first sunrise of the year...there's just no end to the customers."

"No big deal. I've got the time, plus I get paid extra for working through New Year's."

Kusuda heaved a big sigh and closed his magazine. "Does your gloomy roomie also prefer working to going home to his family and being lonely?"

Tohru abruptly furrowed his brow. "I'll thank you to lay off the 'gloomy' stuff. Besides, Fujishima's not going back home. He seems to be on bad terms with his family."

"Wow, no kidding?"

"Something about breaking off from them..."

Kusuda's eyes went wide open. "You mean 'breaking off' as in, 'I've had it, you and I are through'? That's pretty serious!"

"Sure is. It worries me too, but I can't just barge in and ask about it."

Even roommates suffer all sorts of circumstances. So there were matters Fujishima wouldn't bring up to Tohru himself, and he wouldn't say anything if he wasn't asked. That had become clear again today when Tohru had asked him if he were going to see his family for New Year's.

It had been nearly a month since he'd come to live in that apartment. Kusuda had been a complete stranger, and they'd become friends enough that they could carry on long stretches of small talk, yet Fujishima was still reserved. The distance between them had barely lessened because Fujishima was so tough to approach, because of the indebtedness Tohru felt for all his care, and because the time they'd actually spent together had simply been very short. Fujishima was active during the day, Tohru at night. They only saw each other during dinner. Since Fujishima didn't talk during meals and secluded himself in his room right after he was done eating, there was never time to talk.

Work was busy, and Fujishima always came

home looking worn out. Weariness hung all about him; it was in his expression, the way he hung his head so much, the lifeless way he walked. Watching Fujishima's departing form as he retreated to his room right after eating, Tohru had thought, "He's bushed, so he probably wants to hit the sack right away." Left alone in the living room, he'd been lonely and wanted to talk about things, but detaining the exhausted man for something like that would have been rude, and so he had remained there, silent....

Kusuda flapped open an insert ad in the manga magazine. It was for some female talent's photo collection, but on the back it also mentioned a number of other photo collections for things like scenery and animals.

"Come to think of it, when I was hospitalized for my accident, Mr. Fujishima often brought me books, saying I was probably bored, but every one of them was a photo collection."

"Were they nudes?"

"If they had been, I'd have had some use for them."

Kusuda laughed out loud. "Photo collections, huh? Weird. He should've offered you magazines or games...something that would help you kill time better."

"Right. Still, he went to the trouble to bring them, so I couldn't complain..."

He'd been brought well over twenty photo collections while in the hospital. He'd lined them up on the shelf, so even some of the nurses misunderstood and

thought he was a photo lover.

"Are photos a hobby of Mr. Fujishima's, then?"

"That's the feeling I got."

Kusuda narrowed his right eye. "They're out there, you know—whackos who think just because they like something that other people should go ga-ga over it too."

"Don't say that. In his own way, he cares about me."

Tohru still hadn't seen inside Fujishima's room. He'd knocked on the door from outside when he'd had something to say, but had never been inside.

It wasn't as if he'd been told not to go in, but he had the feeling he shouldn't. He imagined that if he opened the door to that innermost room of the apartment, there would be a wall of large, wooden shelves packed with neatly arranged photo collections and a big, carefully placed professional camera.

"Listening to you talk..."—Kusuda laced his fingers behind his head—"...I don't know if Mr. Fujishima's considerate or not, whether he's kind or senile."

Tohru considered once again the man named Fujishima, but no conclusion was forthcoming. He felt he was still missing too many pieces to the puzzle to understand that man properly. He voiced the only thing of which he could be sure.

"...he's not a bad person."

On the evening of the day he talked with Kusuda about Fujishima, Tohru opened his eyes and got

up at 5:00 p.m., fully armed himself in coat, scarf and gloves, and headed out to buy ingredients for dinner. He went around the stores in the shopping district in turn, enjoying the housewives' bargaining battles, and started cooking soon after he got home. He set up the chicken-and-egg rice bowl so it only needed to be topped off with the egg. He would add the finishing touch after Fujishima got home.

Once he'd learned that Fujishima never did any cooking, not even boiling water, Tohru had started cooking for himself. Every night, it was side dishes and/or box lunches from the convenience store or the nearby supermarket. He was sure their food expenses were never outrageous; he just cooked for himself because he wanted to mitigate a little the burden of his being there. When he'd broached the subject and asked if it was okay to fix dinner himself, Fujishima had quickly consented. But the moment he'd seen that Tohru had prepared two servings, Fujishima had told him to stop. It was okay for Tohru to make enough for himself, he said, but he didn't need Tohru going beyond that and making his portion too. For all that he followed through without limit on money matters such as food and clothing expenses, Fujishima was extremely against Tohru doing any work on his behalf.

Yet Tohru in turn was loath to become gradually indebted, as if to some pimp. He refined a strategy for countering this stubborn man. If he said he was cooking for himself in order to float at least a little of the food expenses, Fujishima would never agree. Therefore, he strongly emphasized that he was doing not to bear food

expenses but because he wanted to cook. As a byproduct of this hobby, he said he would share the dinners he made with Fujishima.

When he first started cooking for himself, it was horrible. He'd envisioned a convenient fantasy in which his past self was great at cooking, so when he started he'd let his fingers remember rather than his head, and they would just fly through it...and he got Fujishima involved in the resulting debacles. Yet Fujishima never complained once, not for the rice cooked with the wrong amount of water, not for the overcooked, mushy stir-fried vegetables, not even for the char-blackened hamburgers. He just swallowed them all without expression.

Recently, he'd gotten the hang of it, and he no longer produced failures that made him cover his eyes. He learned that if he just held to the portions written in the cookbooks, he wouldn't make things that tasted horrible.

This day, Fujishima got home after 7:30. While he was eating, he actually spoke up for the first time in ages during a meal. "I've got something to tell you after dinner. Could you stay around in the living room?" For an instant, Tohru thought it might be about telling him to get out and manage on his own.

After dinner, Tohru prepared coffee for both of them, and he and Fujishima sat facing each other on the sofa set in the living room. The sofa had appeared in Fujishima's place a week ago. The cardboard boxes had been cleared away and there were curtains in the windows, but for all the time that had passed, the empty space didn't look lived in and was still desolate. "I get

the feeling this area could do with a sofa," Tohru had let out. The next day, Fujishima had handed Tohru a credit card and asked him to go buy a sofa. It was scary how the man went into action so readily at his casual word. Tohru had demurred, saying, "I'm the one who brought it up, so you don't have to pay for it," but Fujishima wouldn't be swayed once he'd made up his mind. Tohru couldn't argue with the stubborn man, so he picked out and bought one that was comfortable, not too expensive but not too cheap. Fujishima had always retired to his room right after eating, but after the retro brown sofa had arrived, he started spending at least a little while sitting on it in the living room after dinner.

Sitting opposite him now, Fujishima said, "This is for you," and handed him a paper bag from the bookstore. The instant he pulled out the contents and looked at them, his mind was flooded with tangled thoughts. It was a photo collection, one of those depicted in smaller print in the insert from the manga magazine Kusuda had been reading at his part-time job.

"Thank you..."

He couldn't simply shove back something someone had gone to the trouble to buy for him, so he had no choice but to express his thanks. As he flipped through the book, which was entitled "Scenes of Tokyo," the downtown scenery emerged vividly off the pages, despite being in black and white.

Tohru placed the photo collection on the edge of the low, rectangular table, and Fujishima held out an envelope slightly bigger than a magazine.

"What's this?"

"Just look inside."

He pulled out a school admission guide pamphlet on which was printed "SUOU Vocational School of Photographic Technology."

"It's about five train stations from here. The admission requirements are a high school graduation or an equivalent level of education. From what I hear the entrance exam involves an interview and an essay in March, and the school year starts in April."

"Now, wait just a minute!" Disconcerted, Tohru put the pamphlet down on the table. "Are you telling me to go to a vocational school for photography?"

"I think that would be good."

Tohru wondered why this had been brought up out of nowhere, but the eyes of the man opposite him were earnest.

"I imagine it'll be tough to make photography your occupation. However, you're young, and there's nothing wrong with taking a challenge. I'll help you out with the necessary expenses for when you're attending the school. If you don't like that idea, then think of it as a loan. Naturally, it doesn't matter when you pay it back."

"Now, hold on!" Tohru thought. "I like photography, but I never said a word about wanting to study it! And yet you just decide on your own to get me those photo collections and end it up with 'Go to a vocational school'? I suppose if I had at least a little interest in photography, I'd be happy at such a proposal. Even if you force me to get a job in photography on top of recommending to me a vocational school for a job I'm

not interested in, it'll be nothing but a pain in the butt."

Until now, he'd accepted the things he'd been given, as well as the favors. Certainly a great number were things he'd needed, but he'd sensed Fujishima's own fashion of consideration even in the things he hadn't needed. This time, there was no way he could simply say "Okay." In addition to having no interest, changing over to attending school would require so much money that expenses to date would be no comparison.

Tohru looked away from Fujishima and answered evasively. "Look, I don't know..."

"What's wrong?" he countered strangely.

"I've accepted a lot of books of photos from you, but I never imagined I'd want turn around and be the one taking them."

"You'll probably find an interest in photography while you're studying it."

Rather than accept Tohru's refusal seriously, Fujishima picked up the photo collection that had been put on the table. His hands turned the pages and he considered stopping midway, when an unexpected smile appeared on his face. It was a picture of a little girl tightly clutching a doll, her face on the verge of tears, standing in front of an antiquated penny-candy store....

"You can take pictures that will move people's hearts. I believe you can become a pro."

Tohru had never even touched a camera, and he had no idea on what basis Fujishima could make that claim.

"There's still more than three months until school starts. Take your time and think it over."

After Fujishima left the living room, Tohru stared at the photo collection that remained there. He thought the pictures were good; he could hear the people in them breathing. However, they created no impulse in him to want to take those pictures himself.

There wasn't a single customer in the convenience store in the wee hours of the morning. Patronage always slammed to a halt around 4:00 a.m. They'd start trickling in as the first trains of the day got moving, but until then, these became the "forgotten hours" of the day.

Tohru replenished the stock on the shelves, and as he returned to the checkout counter, Kusuda, who was sitting behind it with his sleepy eyes half-open, let out a huge yawn.

"...busy hours are a pain, but having nothing to do is dull!"

"Guess so."

Kusuda gave his eyes a good rubbing and exhaled sharply.

"Today's the twenty-fourth."

Tohru bopped a Santa doll standing by the register on the head.

"Yep. When the world at large wakes up, it'll be Christmas Eve."

"Aaah, this sucks," said Kusuda, scratching his head fiercely. "We've completely accepted Western European culture. Celebrating Bon and New Year's should be enough if you're Japanese, dammit."

Just the other day, Kusuda had broken up with

the girlfriend he'd been going out with for two months. He'd been talking all about the fun plans they'd had for Christmas Eve, but now he'd done a 180 and joined the Scrooge Party. Tohru gave him a bitter smile, and he responded with an almost habitual "Aaah, I can't take any more of this..."

"Oh, almost forgot. I asked a friend about this before, but he said if you want to get seriously into photography, it takes a lot of money."

"I see..."

Kusuda peered into the sitting Tohru's face.

"So, how's it gone with Mr. Fujishima since then?"

"Same as usual. Every time I see him, he asks me, 'Well?'"

For all that Fujishima had advised him to take time and think about it, he was worried about Tohru resisting entrance to the vocational school and had asked him, "Are your feelings firm on this?" any number of times.

He'd respond, "I'm still thinking about it," but every time he repeated that, being asked bothered him more and more.

"Mr. Fujishima seems more like your patron than your friend, Takahisa."

Hearing Fujishima called a "patron" made it sound like Tohru was entirely kept by the man, and he didn't like the feel of that.

"I was thinking about what I'd heard of your story. Before you lost your memory, could it be you liked photography and told him you wanted to be a

photographer?"

"I don't think so."

"But you don't remember, right? It's possible, ain't it?"

Tohru tapped lightly on the register counter with his fingertips. "If I did like photos before losing my memory, I think something would've come back to me when I saw those photo collections. I looked at them plenty of times when I was in the hospital, but I never felt I wanted to take any myself."

"Well then, why not ask Mr. Fujishima directly? Ask him why he's pushing photography on you."

To be honest, he'd wondered that himself. He wanted to ask, but couldn't. Very occasionally, Fujishima would bring a photo collection into the living room and look at it. It was just like Tohru's, but as Fujishima had never asked to borrow it from Tohru, Tohru had decided Fujishima had his own personal copy. He figured Fujishima liked photographs. He didn't express it in words, but when he looked at the collections, his eyes showed far more enthusiasm and affection than Tohru's.

It must have been Fujishima's ambition to study photography. If he flat-out denied this, then their current relationship, which couldn't be called fantastically close even now, was likely to get even worse. If by chance he and Fujishima fought over this and he was told to get out, he'd be left all alone without a single memory on which he could rely. That scared him more than anything else. That's why he couldn't just outright refuse, telling him "No" or "I don't want to go."

They heard the automatic doors open, and as a

customer entered the store, an electronic chime echoed inside. On conditioned reflex, Tohru and Kusuda turned around and called out, "Welcome!" simultaneously. They mentally braced themselves to deal with the man in the long, black coat. Burglaries were frequent at this time of night. Towards the end of the year, they had been repeatedly cautioned by the manager to be careful.

The instant they met the man's gaze, their wariness dissipated like a puff of smoke. The customer who'd entered was none other than Fujishima. Slowly, he walked once around the interior of the store, then headed for the register with a small bottle of instant coffee and a chocolate bar.

"That'll be 573 yen." As Tohru spoke, the man dug out his wallet. Though they lived together, he felt it would be too formal and reserved for Fujishima to return without a word, so he spoke up. "What are you doing up at this hour?"

Fujishima raised his head. Even when they'd been eating dinner, Tohru had thought something was wrong with the color of his face, and now its blue-white paleness was accompanied by bloodshot eyes. "I have some paperwork that has to be done by morning, but I was getting sleepy, so I had to do something.... I thought I'd have a cup of coffee, but I'd run out. Thinking I couldn't have any made me want it that much more, so I went for a walk and to come buy some while I was at it." He sighed deeply, though Tohru heard it as if he were outright saying, "I'm bushed."

"Work's really keeping you busy."

"It's the end of the year, so it's like this

everywhere. I guess there are some things I'm not used to.... You hang in there at your work too."

The muzak in the store switched to a light Christmas song. The man's hand, which had been reaching out to receive his change, stopped. "...ah." Muttering briefly, he took his change and left the store. After Fujishima had gone home, Kusuda edged up to Tohru and got his attention. "So, was that actually THE Mr. Fujishima?"

Tohru replied it was, at which Kusuda nodded and said, "Wow..."

"I've actually seen that guy plenty of times. From what you were telling me, I'd envisioned someone a lot more dark-geekish, but he looks totally normal!"

"What do you mean? I never said anything about him being a fanboy geek!"

"Well, yeah, but even so."

Another customer came in, a young girl this time. As Tohru was ringing up her purchase at the register, a vision of Fujishima's tired face flickered before him. "Maybe tonight I'll fix something a little fancy for dinner," he thought. "Eating that might cheer him up. It's Christmas, so it might be perfect for a meal like that." Even as he told the customer "That will be 350 yen, please," Tohru was already considering that evening's menu.

Even in the shopping district where he was buying groceries, the familiar woman at the butcher's store brandished "Christmas, Christmas" at him like Mito Koumon revealing his pillbox seal, and the

vigorously pressured Tohru was obliged to buy a so-called turkey. He tasted it broiled teriyaki style, and it was nearly as delicious as chicken. Cream soup and smoked-salmon marinade. Fruit salad. For all the number of items, the table was only a little busier than it usually was at meals.

Everything was prepared, but the crucial ingredient, Fujishima himself, had not yet returned. Tohru lay across the couch, holding his growling stomach, and before he knew it, he'd fallen asleep. By the time he was shaken lightly awake, the clock on the wall read almost 9:00 p.m.

"Sorry I'm late."

Below the apologetic Fujishima's eyes, he could just make out dark circles. The man's face looked more worn out than it had yesterday. Tohru stood up from the sofa so he could reheat dinner right away, when Fujishima presented to Tohru a paper bag he'd been holding.

"What's this?"

"I bought it for you. Please, open it."

The giver's face was more eager than the recipient's for him to open the contents of the bag. Tohru had an unpleasant hunch about it, but for the sake of answering Fujishima's expectations, he drew a package out of the bag. Tearing off the wrapping, Tohru looked at the color photo of the product printed on the outside of the box, then thrust it back at Fujishima, bag and all.

"I can't accept this. Please, take it back."

Fujishima did not take the box.

"You don't have to hold yourself back."

"I'm not holding myself back."

Depicted on the box was a single-lens reflex camera. Just from looking at it, he could guess the camera within wasn't cheap.

"I thought it would be a good thing to give you as a Christmas present. Your feelings might change once you got your hands on an actual camera."

"Look, just take it back, please."

"That isn't necessary."

"Fine, then I'll return it."

Once Tohru had said that much, Fujishima finally seemed to recognize the rejection that Tohru was expressing from deep down. At that moment, his face, tired but apparently in good humor, concealed a bitter expression.

"If you don't like that camera, I can exchange it for another one..."

Tohru couldn't stand it any more and raised his voice. "I don't want that camera or any other camera. I don't know what you're expecting by making me get a camera, but no matter how much you recommend it to me, I just can't see myself having any interest in taking photos for a living."

There, he'd finally said it. He was afraid of Fujishima's reaction, but at least it was off his chest. That's right, he had no interest in photography. It would've been nice if he had, but there was nothing he could do about his feelings.

"Why aren't you interested?"

Tohru's expression and voice clearly blamed himself for rejecting photography. "I don't have a



reason; I just don't find any appeal in it..."

"But maybe in time..."

Tohru intercepted the man in mid-sentence as he started to express the possibility. "I don't believe you choose a special occupation like photography just because of popular interest. You have to WANT to do it. But I don't. Even if I went to school half-hearted, I don't think I could keep it up."

He was sure the man had heard his words clearly. For a while, Fujishima's manner showed he was lost in thought, then he let out a grumble.

"But I still think the best thing for you would be to pursue photography."

For all that Tohru had expressed his lack of interest, it seemed Fujishima still wouldn't understand. Tohru then got mad at the man for not grasping the situation.

"Why are YOU so stuck on photography, Mr. Fujishima? I don't want something I don't like to be forced on me."

Fujishima's forehead rapidly creased. "I don't recall forcing you to do anything."

He'd pushed this thing on him so persistently, and now he had the nerve to say, "I don't recall forcing you"! In a fit of anger, Tohru kicked the low table with his heel. Sitting opposite him, Fujishima's body trembled in surprise at his loud voice.

"You did a great job of forcing me! I've got no one to rely on besides you, Mr. Fujishima! And yet you keep pushing this on me time and again...even when I tell you I'm not interested in photography!"

"You never said a word about not liking it."

"I wanted to, but you kept telling me to think about it! Well, I have thought about it in my own way, and now I'm telling you I don't like it."

The man across from him sighed. His expression, as if he were shocked at a petulant child, wounded Tohru even further.

"Calm down and hear me out. Right now, you're working part-time at the convenience store. I felt one or two months would serve well as a rehabilitation period, and that it was good for you to work outside, but it's about time you find something you want to do."

The words of the doctor from the emergency hospital where he'd initially been taken passed through his mind: "But instead of worrying about the past, why don't you think about the future?"

"I understand what you're saying," he thought. "I understand, but finding something I 'want to do' isn't that simple. Talking about it gradually becomes a pain, and feels like I'm being negligent."

Out loud, he said, "I'm fine. I'll stick with the part-time job. When my memories come back and I remember what I wanted to do, I'll return to my former life."

"How long do you think it will be before they return?"

At the merciless words, Tohru clenched his fists, digging his nails into his palms, and hung his head.

"You might remember tomorrow, or you might never remember. Instead of waiting for someday and doing nothing, I think you should put effort into doing

whatever you can do now the best you can."

"But I've told you several times I don't want to work in photography!" He was working up himself with the volume of his voice.

"Don't get emotional. I don't want to argue with you."

Being told this by the very person who'd irritated him made Tohru's temper rise even further. He thought Fujishima was being one-sided and unsympathetic, but on the other hand, what he was saying was still true. He hated all the more that even in his emotional mind, he could see that his opponent was right.

"Fine. If I remember, then I'm good, right? I'll remember everything up to now." Tohru gave the back of the couch a violent smack.

"How will you remember?"

Questioned over what he'd said in the heat of the moment, Tohru was embarrassed for a reply.

"I'll...I'll try asking around. Maybe the people where I used to work...anyway, I'll talk to people who knew the old me. Then I might remember something..."

"Improvement of amnesia is pure chance. Blindly exploring your past won't cure you. Didn't the doctor tell you that? Talking with people who knew you before would be pointless where getting your memory back is concerned."

The man was so calm Tohru wanted to cry. He clenched his teeth and glared at the man, then flew out of the living room and shut himself in his own room. He curled up under the sheets like a hibernating bear and held his head, crying in his frustration. He repeatedly

cursed himself for being unable to remember anything, as well as his self-centered roommate.

His hunger had gone far away, and the Christmas dinner he'd worked so hard to make for someone had now become a waste of time. After some thirty minutes had passed, he heard a knock at the door. He knew who it was and didn't answer.

"I was out of line too. ...I'm sorry," came the voice through the door. Fujishima had apologized. Even though he was the culprit who made Tohru feel so empty, Tohru still felt better for getting the apology. Fujishima was the only person on whom he could depend now. If he were abandoned, he'd truly be alone. He knew that all too well.

If his memories returned...Tohru gripped the sheets tightly. If his memories returned, he'd know people besides Fujishima, he'd be able to remember what he'd wanted to do...he wouldn't have to feel this uncertain, helpless loneliness any more.

It took about two and a half hours by express train to reach the town where he used to live. The rain turned to snow as soon as he crossed the prefectural border. That by itself gave him the keen impression he was going inland.

Only last night had he resolved to try going to where he used to live. After his argument with Fujishima, he'd come to feel he simply had to go back and see where he used to live at least once. He didn't believe his memory would dramatically return just because he went back, but he wanted at least a few clues to his old self.

Hoping there'd be something to touch off his

brain, he'd tried once again turning out the contents of the cardboard box that had been given to him, as it supposedly held items he'd used before the accident, but all it contained was some faded clothing and a few items of tableware. Not a single thing in it was a help in restoring his memory.

Resolving to return was fine, but he had no idea WHERE to return. He'd been told the names of the delivery service and his old high school when he was filling out his resume, but only the names. He couldn't ask Fujishima for the addresses of his old apartment or the delivery service—Fujishima had declared his going home to be "pointless."

The next day, Tohru had walked to the hospital after his part-time job shift was over. When he poked his head into the nurse's station of the surgical ward where he'd been admitted, the nurse recognized him on sight and spoke up. "Well, if it isn't Tohru! What's the matter?" He told her his reasons for wanting to know where he used to live. "The doctor was in the back just now..." she replied, and she went to call his attending physician. However, the doctor didn't know the address of Tohru's old apartment either; the address recorded in his medical record was for Fujishima's apartment house. For the time being, he got them to tell him the address and phone number of the emergency clinic from which he'd been transferred. It was just past the next prefecture over. He remembered riding in the ambulance for a long time when he'd been transferred, but he'd never thought it was that far away. After a longer train ride than anticipated, he got off at the station, where a blizzard

was raging on the other side of the ticket gate.

When he called on the emergency hospital, the young doctor who'd been Tohru's attending physician remembered him well. "Amnesia leaves a strong impression," he repeated twice. Having finally learned his old apartment's address, Tohru clutched the memo on which he'd written it down in his right hand as he hailed a cab from in front of the hospital. The fare was painful to his destitute self, but considering when he had to catch the return train, he didn't have the spare time for hunting around on fool's errands on foot. The cabbie didn't recognize the name of the apartment building Tohru indicated, but he figured about where it was from the address and ran the vehicle over there.

"I guess this is it..." After driving along for about fifteen minutes, the taxi driver stopped the car. Through the window, Tohru could see a shabby old two-story apartment house standing on its own. Written on the signboard up front, just like on his memo, was "Iwasaki Villas." This was it, all right. He'd never thought he'd lived somewhere high class, but...even so, this was an old building. Tohru got out of the cab and walked all the way around the apartment. The tin siding on the walls had gone reddish brown with rust, and the door to the entrance hall was apparently just woodgrain paneling glued to plywood, the base of which had split and curled up outward.

Not an atom of nostalgia rose within him. He couldn't even imagine what sort of life he'd lived at this apartment house. And yet it was a fact that he'd lived here. Tohru slowly stepped into the apartment site.

He'd lived in Apartment 2 on the first floor. Perhaps the residents next door in #1 or #3 would know something.

As he was about to knock on the door to #1, his right hand stopped. He could hear the shrill voice of a woman from within. As he stepped back in surprise, the door opened outward forcefully, and a woman with reddish brown hair leapt outside. She wore a thin sweater and a short skirt, along with summery, white sandals. Turning to face back into the room, she spat out a stream of filthy language, then violently slammed the door shut. Turning sharply to face forward, Ms. Reddish Brown Hair noticed Tohru. At first her eyes flew wide in surprise, then she averted her gaze from Tohru and crossed past in front of him as if ignoring his existence.

"Um, excuse me."

She did not stop even when he spoke up. He started to go after her, but she stopped, turned around and spat, "Don't follow me!" from her pale face.

"I just wanted to ask you something."

"I said, 'Don't follow me,' got it?"

This person knew him. When she'd seen his face, her eyes had not been those of someone seeing a person for the first time. He didn't want to lose any clue to his past, so he started following the retreating woman.

The instant he grabbed her arm, the woman let out a small shriek and crouched down where she was. Holding her left arm high like he was hoisting a fish on a line, Tohru was puzzled. He had no idea how to start talking to the shivering, frightened woman.

"Stand up—please, stand up." The woman's

bare knees were turning red atop the thin layer of snow. "You'll freeze if you sit there. Please, stand up."

The color of fear showed vividly in her eyes as she looked at him. "You know who I am, don't you?"

"What the hell you talkin' about?" The woman's lips, which were even redder than her knees, trembled slightly.

"I lost my memory in an accident. I wanted to remember the past, so I came to this apartment where I used to live, but..."

The woman narrowed her right eye and looked up at Tohru suspiciously.

"Could you tell me as much as you know about what kind of person I was? Please, I need your help."

There was a brief silence. Suddenly, the woman started laughing. She continued laughing for a bit, then muttered, "You gotta be kidding me."

Sitting at the innermost seat at the rustic coffee house near the apartments, the woman blew out a puff of cigarette smoke. She glared narrowly at Tohru, staring as if he were a panda on exhibition. "So it's fer real, this am-nee-ja?"

Her age became unclear when she spoke. Her voice was young, but the tired, double-lidded eyes that looked at him and the overly heavy make-up obscured the woman's age.

"What was I like?"

Acting slowly, she brought her coffee to her mouth. She glanced up at him and chuckled. By not

offering a reply, she seemed to be enjoying Tohru's restless fretting in his need to hear one.

"Not much I can tell ya. It ain't like we was close or nothin'."

"Whatever you know will be great."

The woman leaned across the table and blew smoke in Tohru's face at point-blank range. Without thinking, he inhaled, and emitted several choking coughs. The smoke got in his eyes.

"What was that all about?"

The woman sat back in her chair and shrugged. "You was the kinda guy who wouldn't think twice 'bout poppin' anyone who did that to ya a good one—man or woman." She crushed her cigarette in the ashtray. A thin plume of smoke arose, then it went out.

"You was violent, hadda real temper. You was livin' next door, and if we made even a little fuss, you'd be screamin' out 'Shaddup!' You had this sharp stare, like a yakuza, a sharp tongue ta match.... Me and my old man was always talkin' 'bout you. 'He wasn't raised right,' we'd say."

Screaming, hitting.... He stared at his interlaced hands on the table. You needed a major impulse to hit someone. Some people in this world could cross that line easily, some couldn't. He would never have believed he was the type of man who could hit someone that easily.

The woman peered up into his face. She must have seen something funny, as she laughed again.

"Whatcha doin' these days?"

"I'm working part-time at a convenience store while being helped out by a friend."

"Why doncha forget the past? Sounds like yer livin' a lot righter now. Maybe it's a good thing you got that am-nee-ja," she declared with a serious face. "Why not do yer life over? That way, if you let folks think you died in the accident, you won't have ta deal with 'em tellin' you, 'Serves you right.'"

Snow saturated the ground, and Tohru walked slowly along the wet asphalt.

The dusty flakes showed no sign of stopping or even slowing. His fingers were half-numb with cold, even putting them in his pockets hadn't warmed them in the slightest.

He and the woman had parted at the coffee shop. As he gave thought to his past self, his mood darkened. He didn't want to believe he'd been such a terrible person.

Leaving the coffee shop, he turned right and walked for about ten minutes, and there, just as the woman had said, was the business office of the delivery company where he believed he was once employed. Several people noticed Tohru when he entered the large building, and they smiled and bid him welcome in unison. When he broached the subject by saying, "Er, I'd like to ask about Tohru Takahisa, a former employee of yours..." the woman at the reception desk tilted her head and remained smiling. He became uneasy, wondering if they thought him strange for asking about himself in such a reserved fashion, but the woman asked him to wait just a moment, then vanished into the inner rooms. Taking in his surroundings, he found that if anything, the

people who'd spoken to him showed no sign of caring about it. He'd imagined that when he returned to his former place of work, the co-workers who'd been his acquaintances would surround him and burst out with a barrage of questions—"Are you all right?" "Where've you been all this time?"—so when there was no reaction, he felt a touch of loneliness.

After a short while, the receptionist returned, bringing with her a middle-aged man in a suit. "You said you wanted to know about a Tohru Takahisa, but I have no recollection of anyone by that name working at this office. We have a lot of branches; are you sure you're at the right one? If you insist, I can enquire with people at our other branches, but we get a lot of employee turnover with people working short-term part-time, so I think it'd quickly become complicated. We could contact you as soon as we found out, if that's all right with you. Before that, though, forgive me for asking, but why are you searching for this person? Are you with a detective agency?"

The tone was polite, but the man had a look on his face as if he were seeing something suspicious. If Tohru said he himself was this Tohru Takahisa, that he'd lost his memory in an accident and had come to talk with people who knew his former self, would this man believe him, he worried. His uncertainty only seemed to invite further suspicion from the other man, who narrowed his eyes, tilted his head and asked, "Is something the matter?"

"Never mind, then."

He rushed out of the offices as if escaping.



The snow out front was falling a little more fiercely, spurring on his sense of futility. Finding people who'd known him was not that easy. And even if he found and queried them, the results might not be what he'd hoped. Enough already. He was going home. Feeling neglectful, he started walking off when he saw a truck bearing the delivery company's logo turn right from the road passing in front of the building and head towards him. He stopped until the truck had gone past, then started walking again. At the road, he looked left and right, not knowing which way the station was.

"Hey, Takahisa!"

Someone had called his name. As he turned around, a young man wearing brown and green overalls got out of the truck that had just slid into the office grounds. He turned toward Tohru and ran up to him.

"Been a while. How are ya?" The friendly face broke into a smile. He was a skinny, ruddy-faced man with conspicuous acne scars. "When you left work right after the accident, people started wonderin' if you weren't dead."

"Er...do you know me?"

The man grinned.

"Know you? We worked together, man!"

Tohru grasped the man's right hand in both of his own.

"Um, could I ask you something? Please."

The man looked alternately at his grasped right hand and at Tohru and put on a dubious expression. "Whatever you gotta tell me, I'm still on the clock. I've got several more stops, then I gotta get back to my own

branch, but..."

"Where did I work?"

"Where...? The Kitasato branch, with me. What's the matter with you?"

"Look, please just hear me out. I really need to ask you something. I'll wait until you're done with work, so please, please help me."

The man stared blankly at Tohru with his mouth half open. "You really Takahisa? There's somethin' different about you..."

"I have amnesia. Thanks to the accident, I can't remember a thing that happened before it. I want to remember my past, so I'm looking for people who knew me."

The man tilted his head. After a short silence, he merely muttered, "That so."

The landscape visible outside the night bus was pitch dark. He couldn't see a thing. His seat was narrow, so he quietly stretched his back. The man in the business suit sitting next to him snored loudly in the slow rocking, his right leg sticking out in the aisle.

He had missed the last train back and been at a loss over what to do, but the station manager had been kind enough to tell him he could still make the night bus. Thanks to him, Tohru was able to make his return trip before the day was out.

He put his thoughts in order. What the woman had told him. What his former coworker had told him. Putting them together, he constructed his pre-amnesia self. And yet he couldn't think of that person as the "real" him. When he'd been listening to the stories, it

was like hearing about someone he didn't know, not himself.

It had been after 7 p.m. by the time Ishii, the man who'd been his co-worker, came to to the coffee shop where he'd been waiting.

"Man, I thought work was gonna kill me for sure." He said the same things as the woman who lived next to Tohru's old apartment. "But it's great you made it okay through that two-car collision." Ishii pulled a cigarette out of the breast pocket of his delivery company uniform and lit it.

"No, it was a one-car accident—I was looking to the side while driving and I hit a telephone pole."

Ishii's hand stopped as he was about to take a drag on the cigarette. "Wait a sec. I know there was someone else involved. One of my other coworkers was passing nearby right after the accident. He told me he saw you, all covered in blood, being carried to the ambulance from between two badly wrecked cars. He thought you were done for."

"That's odd..." thought Tohru, looking at the confident man's face. Fujishima had told him it was a one-car accident, but Ishii was saying someone else had been involved.

"They had half the street shut down for hours. I thought it was a really major accident, but there were no rumors in the papers or the TV news, so people was sayin' you and the other guy musta not been hurt that bad after all. But you quit work without even showin' up there and even vacated your apartment. We tried to ask after you, but we didn't know which hospital you were

in, so people started sayin', 'That's funny. Maybe he IS dead.'"

He blew out a puff of smoke. "Light up." He offered another cigarette to Tohru, who was watching him. When Tohru declined, the man gave a wry grin.

"You ARE messed up. Don't tell me you don't smoke."

"Yeah, well..."

"What happened? You were a real chimney. Do your tastes 'n' all change when you get amnesia?" Unable to remember his past even if asked, Tohru had no means of comparison. "Well, never mind that. So, after the rumors started that you were dead after all, we put some thought into it. If you were dead, why was there nothin' about it on the news? We began wonderin' if the whole thing had been hushed up 'cause the guy at fault was some big-name politician or some higher-up in the police force. So what really happened?"

Even if pressed, Tohru didn't know much about the accident. "I... don't really know myself..."

"Well then, whatcha doin' now?"

"I'm working part time while I stay for free at a friend's place. I don't have money, so..."

"Don't have money? Didn't you have a savings account?" Ishii tilted his head.

"No. I never saved up anything."

"Nah, I know you had somewhere close to five, six hundred grand. You told me you were gonna work 'til next March, then quit once you'd made your wad."

"But Fujishima never gave me a bank book..."

"Who's Fujishima?"

"He's the friend who's taking care of me now.

Apparently, we were good friends before..."

Ishii's brow wrinkled and he looked sober. "Is he really your friend? I don't recall you ever mentionin' the name Fujishima."

Tohru's misgivings were growing. The circumstances of the accident were different than he'd originally been told, and he had no savings account when he should have. He'd only come to hear about his past, but the more he heard, the more he distrusted Fujishima as the only solid grounding in his life.

"You should find out the real deal from him."

"Guess so..." he replied vaguely. But would he be able to ask Fujishima? The accident aside, could he ask about the money...? In the worst case, even if Fujishima had stolen his savings, what if there was no proof? That seemed fairly likely. He still felt divided—even if Fujishima had stolen the money, he'd done a lot for Tohru both during hospitalization and after release, so Tohru could at least give Fujishima his savings account, right?

He was more scared of finding out Fujishima HADN'T stolen from him. What if he said, "I know I had a savings account..." but he really hadn't? Fujishima would hardly be pleased to know Tohru suspected him of cheating him out of money. Their relationship was already awkward now, and this matter might drive them too far apart. If they just became distant, fine, but what if Fujishima said, "So that's how little you can trust me?" and deserted him?

He was overthinking it, and his head was

spinning. This wasn't what he'd wanted to find out. He hadn't come to seek out Fujishima's lies. He'd gotten on the train hoping to find out at least a little about who he was before he lost his memory.

"What kind of guy was I?"

Ishii tilted his head. "What kind? Well, you were quick to get into a fight and start swingin', but you were a regular guy. Now you seem quieter."

Just like the woman next door had said. Tohru Takahisa was a short-tempered man, quick to throw a punch. While there were certainly traces that the man he'd been existed, it was like looking at something drawn in a picture; it didn't seem real at all. Perhaps he would see the big picture when he'd gathered more of the pieces. But would he be able to accept that it was him?

"Is there anyone else around who knew me? Someone at the office, maybe..."

In response to Tohru's desperation, Ishii folded his arms and made a thoughtful grunt. "Someone close to ya, huh? Well, you never said nothin' about havin' a girlfriend. Oh, I know! Maybe she was your girl? We got several calls for you from some woman after you quit."

"From a woman?"

"She was pretty stubborn. Kept saying she wanted to know where you were."

I remember because I took a lot of those calls."

Tohru handed Ishii a note with Fujishima's address and phone number written on it so that if the woman called again, they could have her contact him directly at the apartment house where he was now living.

Ishii looked at the address in surprise. "You're livin' a real long ways from here, ain't ya?"

He parted with Ishii before 9:00 p.m., who'd told him, "You should be gettin' back soon, or the Big Guy won't let ya hear the end of it." Tohru wanted to talk more, but couldn't say anything so selfish. As they left the shop, Ishii seemed to guess how discouraged Tohru was. He clapped his hand on Tohru's shoulder and said, "I know it's rough, but hang in there. If there's somethin' you wanna know, just gimme a ring. And if that woman calls, I'll let ya know right away."

He thanked Ishii and parted with him in front of the station, but not a minute later, Ishii came rushing back. "Oh, yeah—I just remembered!" The white puffs of his breath danced rhythmically.

"Well, it ain't anything big, I guess. You never really talked much 'bout yourself, but this one time, you said, 'When I get enough saved up, I'm goin' to a vocational school for photography.' Said you wanted to be a photographer. That was it, really..."

Abruptly, his previously uncertain past and present were linked. "Thank you," he said.

"Aah, it was nothin'," Ishii replied, looking embarrassed, then he ran off again.

Fujishima had obstinately pushed him to go to a photography vocational school, and his past self had said he wanted to attend one. Until now, he'd thought Fujishima had been projecting his own dreams onto someone else. But his past self had wanted to go to a photography school, and Fujishima had known it.

Ishii had said, "I don't recall you ever mentionin' "

the name Fujishima." But how could someone he'd never seen or met know what he once hoped to do? Perhaps Fujishima was trying to continue and grant him that wish even after Tohru had forgotten all about it.

Fujishima had said that he would handle all the expenses of attending the school. Even if that money was Tohru's own savings, total tuition costs would soon make that five or six hundred thousand disappear. Therefore, Fujishima should have nothing to gain by doing so.

"I was wrong," he thought meekly. If he'd only known, he wouldn't have objected like that. He wouldn't have argued. If only Fujishima had told him, "Before you lost your memory, you liked photography a lot and said you wanted to attend a vocational school for it. So why not give it a try? You might remember something, and you might gain some interest in it while you were doing it," if he'd only made it that easy to understand, he might have considered attending the school himself.

His words were not decisive enough, but even if no one else said so, he felt it was just like Fujishima to be that way. Tohru was comforted by the thought that he could trust the man. He still felt uneasy about the questionable differences in Ishii and Fujishima's stories, but now he believed from the heart that he could trust Fujishima.

He'd taken care of Tohru in his own, awkward way.... In the bus, Tohru bowed his head. He'd intended to come gather together his past, and something felt strange about coming back after unexpectedly gaining a new understanding of the man's consideration for him.

All signs of the snow vanished when he crossed the prefectural border. By the time he arrived at the bus stop in front of the train station, it was after midnight. It was cold out, but his step was light as he returned home. After walking fifteen minutes, he could see the lights of the convenience store where he worked. Beyond that was the familiar route. He got more comfort from walking this road than from the shabby apartment in which he apparently had lived for several years. It felt like he was coming home. When he'd left here this morning, he'd resolved never to return if his memory came back, but his heart trembled with how much he felt at home with the scenery reflected in his eyes. He was keenly self-conscious that this was where his current self would come home. He wanted to get back to his warm house quickly. He wanted to be near the person who cared about him.

Standing in front of the foyer, he checked his watch. 12:30 a.m. Fujishima knew he didn't have a part-time shift tonight. He was probably worried, what with Tohru coming home so late without calling or leaving a note.

Tohru figured Fujishima might be sleeping, so he opened the door quietly.

The hallway was dark, but light shone out of the living room.

"I'm home," he called out to the back of the head protruding over the top of the living room's oblong sofa, his voice tense even as he feigned nonchalance. "It's cold out. We might even get some snow here..."

His words were cut off by a loud thump that

startled him. Nervously, he worked his way around to the front of the sofa, where the first thing he saw was a wine glass that had fallen over on the low table. Fujishima was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the sofa, tightly gripping an amber bottle of some brand or other of wine in his right hand. On second glance, Tohru spotted two other bottles, apparently empty, rolling easily about Fujishima's feet. Fujishima's cheeks were flushed, his eyes were glazed, and his hair was a mess. His necktie was loosened and hung down untidily over his shirt, which was untucked from his slacks and all wrinkled. Tohru had never seen Fujishima with so much as a hair out of place and could not conceal his shock at the latter's worn-out appearance. As the saying went, Fujishima was impeccably dressed morning 'til night. He'd even wondered if Fujishima had ever masturbated in his life. Fujishima's right hand moved, bringing the wine bottle to his mouth. He gulped straight from it noisily, then slammed it down on the table with a loud bang. Tohru gaped in astonishment at the figure wavering on the couch before him, unable to tell if he was being an angry drunk or was just in a bad mood.

"Tohru."

Fujishima normally addressed him as "you" or "Takahisa," which was somehow creepy, but just for tonight, he was calling Tohru by name. He could sense anger along with the feeling of incongruity.

"Wh-where...where've you been?"

Stuttering—another first. Apparently, he was drunk and couldn't get his tongue to work right.

"I'm sorry I ran so late without calling." The

words of apology spilled honestly from his mouth. Fujishima remained still, staring at Tohru as if searching for something, then his head abruptly collapsed downward.

"I th-thought you weren't coming back..."

"Huh? How come?"

"I th-thought maybe...your m-memories returned..."

He sat facing Fujishima, setting the fallen, empty wine glass back upright.

"I'd have come back even if they had. I mean, I WAS kicked out of my old apartment for not paying rent. I couldn't go back there now."

Fujishima covered his face with his hands. Slowly, he sank down on the sofa. As he did, he kicked away the low table in front of him. Tohru hurriedly leapt up to catch the wine glass he'd placed there, as it was about to fall over again.

"I didn't know you drank too, Fujishima."

"Of course I do..."

The reply was harsh. He could sense a sharpness in it that was different from the usual curtness. Fujishima apparently WAS in a bad mood, and Tohru felt it was probably best that he retire to his room right away, but there was still something he had to say first. He rubbed his fingertips together over his knee.

"I was late today because I went to my old apartment and talked with one of my co-workers from my old job."

Fujishima's reclining form sat up suddenly. "Y-you what?"



"I thought that if I met and talked with people who knew the old me, it might trigger some memories..."

"Wh-who s-said you could do that?!"

Tohru blinked, surprised by the yell. Both the man's fists were clenched, and his shoulders were trembling slightly. He could tell from the signs that Fujishima was really angry.

"What's the idea of doing all that? Didn't I tell...tell you yesterday that it was p-pointless?"

Denying it in the way he held his head, he remembered the frigidness of the snow, the walking around in the cold, the long hours being jolted around on the train and bus. And after all that, he'd remembered nothing. And yet he hadn't regretted coming back here; just noticing Fujishima's consideration for him, he'd been happy with it.

He'd intended to thank Fujishima after talking about what had happened over there. He'd intended to express his gratitude for everything Fujishima had done, all his consideration so far. But at hearing those heartless words just now, his feelings of gratitude had blown away somewhere. The only thing in him now was anger, growing explosively.

"Well, how could I be sure if it would mean anything or not if I didn't at least try going back?"

Fujishima shook his head back and forth, his eyes shut.

"Even if you did tell me I wouldn't remember, it didn't mean the chances were completely zero!" He finally turned away, wondering if Fujishima was in any

mood to listen. "You, you wouldn't tell me anything in the first place! That's why I went all that way—I was mentally driven into a corner and had all these doubts!"

After a brief silence, Fujishima spilled out his reply, slurred by his inebriation.

"W'z pointl'ss..."

Rage blazed hot in Tohru's head. He stood up from the sofa and glared down at Fujishima. "You have no idea how I feel. You have no idea how tough it is to be told, 'Do this,' 'Do that,' when your head's all blank inside and you have no idea what you really should do! It's like you telling me to go ahead and take off when I can't see around me or tell that there's a cliff in front of me! You have no idea what it's like to be so blindly afraid! How COULD you know?!"

Fujishima smacked the sofa. "So starting your life from scratch is that painful, huh? You hate starting fresh with no worries about food, clothing or shelter that much? Why aren't you satisfied? That's why you went looking for your past, right, because you weren't satisfied? So tell me! Do whatever you want! Tell me right here and now what you want to do!"

The idea was wrong at the root. Even though all those needs were fulfilled, this feeling of his would not go away. Suppose you were given a box and you couldn't see inside it. Then you were told never to lose it or even let go of it. Wouldn't you wonder more and more about what was in the box, until you couldn't help thinking about it, until you just had to find out the truth about it? And you'd wonder all the more because you couldn't let go of it.

That's what his forgotten memories were like. He knew his old memories were locked away somewhere inside his head, but he couldn't see them. He didn't know what they were. But it was because he didn't know that he couldn't just forget about them or give them up. And so all he was left with was this desire to know what they were. Always.

"If you'd really told me about myself, I'd have been happy to let it go! And I wouldn't have been so stressed about everything you've said!"

The man dropped his gaze.

"Don't just stand there, say something!"

Fujishima stood up unsteadily, but his legs got tangled and he fell back down to sit on the sofa. He heaved a sigh and violently mussed his hair.

"...I won't interfere with you any more. You can do as you like, whatever you want to do."

Tohru felt like he'd been suddenly shoved away, and for an instant he was on the verge of tears. To bolster up his heart from where it had sunk, somewhere around his feet, he blustered defiantly. "Yeah, I'll do what I like, all right. I won't be borrowing any more help from you."

The parting words had just pushed their way out of the depths of his throat. He flew boldly out of the living room, just barely fitting his toes into his shoes before taking off outside. He raced away as fast as he could, as if to shake off any hesitation.

A soft sensation on his face stopped him at the night-darkened park. Snow, snow that had not been falling earlier had started to come down. He pressed the

cuff of his coat to his nose and sobbed miserably. The tears came dripping out; he couldn't stop them. ...he didn't want to think about why he was crying.

Across the park, he could see the night-lights of the twenty-four-hour store. Staring at the black ground that was soaking up the snow, he trudged along toward the light. He couldn't think of anyplace else to go...

Kusuda and Yoshii were doing the late-night part-time work at the convenience store. Like Kusuda, Yoshii was a regular on the graveyard shift and had often been teamed up with Tohru. A big-hearted guy, he didn't breathe a word of complaint when Tohru occupied the cot in the locker/waiting room in the back of the store, even though he had no duties there at the time. Of course, this became a problem when Yoshii went on break, so Tohru left the waiting room, taking a folding chair with him to a corner of the register counter, where he sat down.

He looked up at the clock, which read 3:30 a.m. Outside, a driving blizzard had sprung up without him being aware of it. The closed-circuit broadcast in the store went on rhythmically, even though there wasn't a customer around, which somehow lent it an inhumane feel.

"So you had an argument with a drunken Mr. Fujishima and you've left the apartment, huh?" Kusuda had heard Tohru's story all the way through, and now he took a deep breath, standing with his arms folded.

"All I did was go to talk with some people I knew back then, but when he put it like, 'What you're doing is pointless,' I blew my stack and..."

"I don't know if I understand your need to know either, Takahisa. So, did you get anything out of the folks you knew? Bring back any memories?"

Tohru hung his head. "...and so our hero regained his memories there, and he lived happily ever after."

"What's that all about."

"The ideal ending."

Kusuda delivered the final blow with, "So, you couldn't remember anything, huh." Tohru rattled the chair he sat in back and forth like a restless child.

"Before I got amnesia, it seems I had a pretty short temper. Apparently, I had no problem hitting people, even women..."

"You hit people?" Kusuda stared Tohru hard in the face. "Well, you'd never know it to look at you."

"C'mon, I said that was before I got amnesia." Knowing it was a joke, Tohru could laugh. Kusuda laughed too.

"Looking at you now, I just can't imagine you hitting people and all that. I mean, you have an argument with your buddy, get all depressed, and come by your job, all Little Mr. Lonesome, to gripe," he teased, making Tohru turn red.

"Knock it off. I couldn't think of anywhere else to go. My memory only goes back four months, after all."

"Whatsamatter, sonny-boy, you lost? Should Uncle Kusuda take you back to your home?"

Tohru made as if to hit him, and Kusuda cowered exaggeratedly. "No violence, please! Let's hear it for pacifism!"

The automatic doors opened, putting an end to the fun. Customers were still coming in, even if sporadically, so he could no longer get Kusuda to deal with him. Just then, he felt lonely. Staring at Kusuda's back while the latter absently punched register keys, he thought of Fujishima. Just recalling what Fujishima had said to him got him fuming again, but then he considered that Fujishima might be a little worried about him since he'd left, and he felt miserable.

As he hung his head, Kusuda slapped him on the shoulder. "You should be getting on home. Just 'cause he told you, 'Do what you want,' it didn't necessarily mean, 'Get out.'"

"But he didn't try to stop me from leaving..."

Kusuda tapped his fingertips on the countertop. "Is it possible you actually just WANTED Mr. Fujishima to stop you?"

"No, you're wrong!"

"I don't think I am," Kusuda declared confidently.

"And I'm telling you you are." But however obstinately he denied it, he felt deep down there was a part of it he couldn't deny, which made him angry.

Being with Fujishima worried him. Their personalities didn't match. Just about anything Fujishima was told made him gloomy. And yet, when Fujishima had told him, "I won't interfere," he'd felt lonely, as if he'd been abandoned.

The store clock chimed faintly four times. Afternoons were busy, so he usually didn't notice it chiming the hour, but at night the sound positively

echoed. Kusuda suppressed a large yawn.

"Ah, nuts, I'm getting sleepy. Still got ten minutes before Yoshii comes back out. Say something interesting."

Having basically been told to talk to keep someone awake, Tohru begged off with, "I can't do a comic dialog all by myself."

"Your mem... memory loss..." Kusuda muttered without any sort of segue. "I've been meaning to ask you about this... what's it feel like to forget who you were up 'til now?"

Tohru gave this a bit of thought, during which time Kusuda yawned again. "I guess the closest thing would be the way I feel when I wake up in the morning."

Kusuda's eyes, red from drowsiness and yawning, narrowed slightly.

"I feel great when I'm asleep, and when I've slept enough, I open my eyes. The morning light hits my face, so bright it dazes me. That's what it felt like at first. This blank, dazed feeling that just kept going on and on. It was like the light in front of me was shining into my head too, so it was all white...nothing there. So it was really scary."

Kusuda tilted his head a bit. Tohru was irritated that he couldn't convey the feeling well.

"That's how it was in the beginning. It's not like that now. My memories only go back four months, but at least now I can trace something back. ...I thought about going to ask about my former self, but even though who I am now is vague, hearing stories about the past me was

like hearing about someone I didn't know; there was no sense of reality to it. Who I am now may be uncertain, but it feels more real than the past me I heard about in those stories."

He stared at his palms. He was Tohru Takahisa looking at Tohru Takahisa's palms. The pre-amnesia Tohru Takahisa had looked at them too, his self that was like someone else. Just then, a shiver went down his spine, a feeling as if he wasn't supposed to exist. Frightened that he'd even thought that, Tohru started babbling quickly. "Come to think of it, there was one odd point. It was about the accident..."

"Accident?"

"Yeah, I heard from Mr. Fujishima that my accident was self-inflicted, but a guy I knew back then told me someone else was involved or something."

"Whoah, that's pretty serious." Kusuda's eyes, which had looked bleary and on the verge of sleep, were now open wide.

"I don't really care whether it was a one-car accident or someone else was involved. My insurance paid the medical costs, and I recovered, even if it was with amnesia."

"Yeah, but it makes a big difference whether or not an accident involves another person! If someone else'd been involved, wouldn't there've been damages filed and maybe a trial, depending on where it was?"

"Well, I don't know who's telling the truth..."

"Don't tell me you're using your amnesia as a good thing! Maybe Mr. Fujishima lied about being your friend; maybe he's really the one at fault in the accident,

and since he didn't want charges pressed against him, he told you, his victim, it was self-inflicted since you lost your memory."

Tohru smiled wryly at the tension in Kusuda's voice. "Nah, that couldn't be. He may be unsociable and temperamental, but he's not the type to do something bad."

Kusuda's brow wrinkled and he tugged at his chin. "I dunno. You've only been living with him for a few months; would his true nature show up that quickly?"

Even as he thought it most likely would not, Tohru's doubts were connected by one thread: Fujishima would not tell him about before he lost his memory. He'd been horribly angry when Tohru had gone to ask about his old self.

There were other things that made him wonder. Not even a week after he'd been injured, he'd been transferred to another hospital. Mr. Fujishima had said it was because he personally knew a doctor there, but it could be he'd actually had Tohru taken to a hospital far away from where Tohru lived in order to hide the truth from him.

If Fujishima was indeed at fault in the accident like Kusuda said, then he'd find Tohru regaining his memory to be a bad thing, not a good one. With that attitude, it'd be no wonder he wouldn't talk about the past, or that he got angry when Tohru went to ask on his own.

"Oh—but now that I think about it, if Mr. Fujishima was at fault, he'd have been better off just

leaving you alone. You had amnesia, so you wouldn't remember anything anyway. And if we're talking an accident that left you so badly hurt it took three months to recover, then normally the cops would've been involved and there'd have been no way to fool you. Guess that line of reasoning went nowhere after all."

In a matter of minutes, Kusuda had disproven the dramatic developments of his "Fujishima at Fault Theory." As he listened, Tohru suddenly remembered something.

"Oh, yeah! I talked with someone who used to work with me back then, and it seems that before I lost my memory, I was into photography and was saving up to go to a vocational school for it. Mr. Fujishima knew about this, which is why he pushed photography so hard on me. There's no way someone like that being my friend could be a lie, so he couldn't have been the culprit."

No, he was not a bad person. He hadn't lied. Having found a basis for trusting the man, Tohru was relieved.

"Okay, so you're saying that since you lost your memory, Mr. Fujishima's been trying to get you to take up the photography you wanted to do before you lost it?"

Hearing it that way, he was able to realize what a great person Fujishima was. Kusuda then put his hand on his hip and said "I tooold you," purposely dragging out the word. "It's like I said in the first place, photography was a hobby of yours before you got amnesia. But you kept on insisting, 'No way!'"

Even if it was true, Kusuda was being way

too outspoken about it. Tohru modestly put forth a counterargument: "I couldn't help it—I really had no interest in it when I said that! I was hoping for it, too, that something would flash on in my head when I encountered something I liked!"

Kusuda shrugged and muttered, "Yeah, well..." He then continued, "Even so, Fujishima's actually tasteful, ain't he." Tohru looked up at the man across from him. "When he doesn't say anything, maybe he's being clumsy and tactless, or maybe he's being cool, in a weird way. It's normal, right? You liked it before, and you felt you wanted to try it. But when you didn't, don't you think Mr. Fujishima was hoping for a memory of that sensation, just like you were?"

He believed...believed in his sensations. Believed in his feelings. Believed in people. His heart, which had been so lonely just recently, suddenly filled with warmth. He hadn't known who he was. His existence had been uncertain. Fujishima had seen that he'd forgotten a part of himself, and yet had trusted the "current" him....

"Whatcha gonna do?" Kusuda tilted his head at Tohru, who had laced his fingers together and was mumbling with a serious expression.

"I want to go home."

"Then you should go home."

But they'd had a big argument. He couldn't just go back as easily as Kusuda said. The words he'd flung had surely made Fujishima unhappy. The threshold of the home from which he'd flown so readily was now absurdly high.

As he mumbled "But..." in response, he casually glanced out through the store's front window and saw a human silhouette rapidly approaching. Though he saw the figure at a distance, somehow Tohru knew it was Fujishima. Panicked, he crouched down under the checkout counter.

"What's with you all of a sudden?" Kusuda looked down dubiously at Tohru sitting by his feet. Tohru tugged at the cuff of Kusuda's trousers, raised his finger across his lips, and appealed for his silence with a small "Sh!" At the sound of the automatic doors opening, Kusuda smiled in conditioned response and voiced a cheery "Welcome!" as a greeting, then gave a surprised glance down to Tohru at his feet.

Hurried footsteps approached the counter. He could hear unnaturally rough breathing.

"Um...this may be a foolish question, but..." There was no mistake—it was the man with whom he'd argued three hours ago. "...I believe a man named Tohru Takahisa works here part-time..."

Kusuda nudged Tohru's leg with his right heel as a way of saying, "What do I do?"

"Yes, he does. That is... but he's not on shift tonight."

"I see. Well, I—uh, that is..." Fujishima was stuttered a bit. "Would you happen to know where he, where Takahisa is?"

Again, Kusuda nudged his leg. As Kusuda glanced down, Tohru crossed his his fingers in an X in front of his mouth, signing for him not to tell. "I'm sorry, I'm really not sure..." Kusuda bluffed, his face calm.



"Well then, would you happen to know of anyone else who would be close to him?"

"I'm afraid I really don't, sorry." That was how it was. With no doubt in mind, Fujishima had come looking for him where he worked.

"I see. Sorry to have disturbed your work..."

The footsteps grew distant. Then, just as Tohru was having second thoughts about whether he should have hidden, hurried footsteps approached the counter once again.

"Er, if he shows up to work here, or even if he doesn't, if you happen to meet him, please let him know that Fujishima was apologizing." Fujishima then went home.

Some time passed after the automatic doors sounded, then Kusuda told him, "The coast is clear this time." Yet even though he didn't have to hide now, Tohru didn't stand up, but remained crouched under the counter.

"It's cold out, but he was sweating, and he wasn't even wearing a coat."

Tohru's chest throbbed in pain.

"I'm sure it's okay for you to go home."

Even with Kusuda pushing his back, he couldn't say "I'm going home." The person there had been worried and come looking for him, even though they'd argued and he'd run off. He was so ashamed that he couldn't stand, even though he was happy, too. Unable to apologize honestly, he'd hidden like a coward. He was as low as they came.

"To be honest, you'll be underfoot sitting there

when I run the register." Chased out in the open, Tohru curled up in the chair he'd brought out. Kusuda's big sigh echoed around his hanging head. His ears hurt.

"What does Mr. Fujishima like?" he was asked out of the blue.

"What does he like...?" Tohru very slowly raised his head.

"Yeah, like his favorite brand of cigarette, for instance."

"He doesn't smoke."

"Well, anything he likes, just think of something."

"What he likes, what he likes..." Tohru ransacked the drawers of his memory. Fujishima ate without expression, so Tohru never knew what he liked or hated. Even when he was in the living room, the only program he ever watched was the news. When Tohru watched variety shows, he'd suddenly disappear. Photography. But...that had originally been his own interest. He wasn't sure whether or not Fujishima liked it.... As he considered this, he realized he knew nothing about Fujishima. Nothing at all.

"Fine, I guess something sweet would be all right for him," Kusuda said, sounding as if he were taking Tohru to task. He then went to the pastry rack and took out a piece of strawberry shortcake packaged in a plastic case. Passing the register, he put the cake into a plastic bag imprinted with the store's name and thrust it at Tohru. "Bring him this cake as a present. It should break the ice."

While he was happy for Kusuda's concern,

Tohru just couldn't imagine Fujishima rejoicing over a piece of shortcake like a girl would. He let his doubts slip out directly.

"Well, I don't know if he'll eat it..."

"Sure he will. He bought chocolate before!"

"Chocolate?"

"You don't remember? You were running the register!" Kusuda said, pursing his lips. "He came shopping here in the middle of the night. He bought some coffee and some chocolate and went back home, didn't he? Schoolgirls and office ladies get those things all the time, but we thought it was a rare thing for a guy to like sweet stuff like that!"

The memory of Fujishima buying some chocolate-type item returned to Tohru. He'd definitely bought it, but Tohru simply couldn't imagine that man, expressionless as a Noh mask, eating something sweet. Even as he embraced doubts about Fujishima really eating the cake, he couldn't ignore Kusuda's kindness, so he picked up the bag containing the cake and finally stood up his reluctant self.

Tohru stood before the door to the apartment complex. He'd made it back, but felt too awkward to go inside. Instead, he'd stood there for nearly half an hour, holding the convenience store bag containing the strawberry shortcake. A cold wind mixed with powdered snow blew against him as though urging him on from behind.

While his fingertips fumbled with the key in his pocket, he tried to encourage himself like a child—"I'll

count ten, then unlock the door. I'll count twenty..."—but he still hesitated.

He looked at his watch, which read 5:10 a.m. It had gone past the middle of the night and was now going on early morning. Around him, it was still dark. It was a time when normal people would be asleep. ...yeah, maybe Fujishima was asleep too. Eventually, this backhanded hope that the apologizing party was asleep was what finally gave him the determination to open the door.

He inserted the key into the keyhole and turned it to the right. Normally, there was a slight resistance and a click, but not this time. Thinking this odd, he removed the key, then gave an experimental tug on the doorknob, at which the door glided open soundlessly. Forgetting to lock the door was completely against Fujishima's exacting character.

He shut the door gently so as not to make any noise. Light from the living room spilled out into the hallway. Fujishima was awake. Bracing himself, Tohru took off his shoes in the entry hall, when he noticed an overturned leather boot—just the right one—in the middle of the hallway. He looked for its mate, which turned out to be on its side in the left corner of the entryway. Fujishima always arranged his shoes together when he removed them. As he collected and neatly arranged the carelessly discarded boots, Tohru thought, "Forgetting to lock the door, forgetting about his shoes... something's really off."

Finally, he walked down the hall, but his feet stopped at the entrance to the living room. There was no

way he could pass through and still avoid the "Fujishima Gate." Tohru took a deep breath and went in. He called out, "I'm home," but there was no reply. Undaunted, he went around to the front of the sofa and bowed almost a full ninety degrees.

"I'm sorry for mouthing off like I did."

There was no response. Once again, he apologized. The room was silent. "Could it be...?" he thought and raised his head. From in front of him, he could hear the shallow breathing of someone asleep. Fujishima was lying asleep on the sofa in just his shirt and slacks in the unheated living room.

There were clearly more wine bottles on the coffee table and rolling around the sofa than before he'd left. Tohru was astounded at how much booze he'd put away. Fujishima stirred, his shoulders trembling as if he were cold, and he let out a small sneeze. Tohru thought that would wake him up, but while his eyelids quivered a bit, they did not open.

Tohru switched on the living room heater, then brought a blanket from his own room. Gently, he placed it over the sleeping man. Perhaps aware of the warm object, Fujishima wrapped himself in the blanket and curled up, his eyes still shut. Tohru sat on the floor and grasped his knees at the sleeping man's bedside. Looking at his face, Tohru had to apologize. He'd been eager for so long, but seeing that sleeping face, he became discouraged. And so he now wanted to stay very close to him.

The slightly flushed face. The thin point of the jaw. The unhealthily colored lips. The sunken eyes. The

mussed forelocks falling across his brow. He'd never looked at a man's face so thoroughly before. Nothing about it stood out in particular. One wouldn't think of it as special. If anything, he was the kind of man one would see anywhere. And yet, just like everyone had only one mother, this man was the only one on whom his current self could depend.

Fujishima stirred and half-buried his face in the blanket. As he lay there like that, his eyelids twitched and slowly opened about halfway. His eyes still sleepy, Fujishima rubbed his eyelids roughly with the back of his hand and looked straight at Tohru. Tohru's voice caught, as though something were blocking his throat. He couldn't say anything, not even words of apology...

"Welcome back," the husky voice received him. He felt his heart would burst at just that little phrase.

"Thanks. I'm back."

Fujishima smiled. He looked foolish with the corners of his eyes drooping, but his face was very happy. Delighted, Tohru naturally smiled as well.

Moving sluggishly, Fujishima half-raised himself off the sofa. The blanket slipped down around his feet. He crouched to pick it up, but his body swayed. As Tohru started to think he was strangely precarious, Fujishima rapidly bent over lower and lower until his face was on the verge of smashing into the low table. Tohru's body moved faster than he could think. He caught and supported Fujishima's slanting upper body with one arm, though the reaction sent a thudding shock through it. He found Fujishima rather heavy, as though he'd lost his strength.... He lay Fujishima down on the

couch, as if holding a complete drunkard. When he tried to let go of Fujishima, there was some slight resistance. Before he knew it, Fujishima had turned over on his back, and now his arms were wrapped around Tohru's back as if he didn't want Tohru to go away.

"Mr. Fujishima..." He was held fast and couldn't shake free. While he was at a loss, the embrace rapidly strengthened, until Tohru had no choice but to get on top of Fujishima.

"Um, aren't I heavy?" Whether or not Fujishima was listening, he made no reply, but simply rubbed against his body like a cat. As Tohru wondered if Fujishima was still that cold, even though the heater was on, he looked at the man's face, only to see Fujishima's bleary eyes staring at him. There was something different about him. The fawning, feverish gaze, the drinking straight from the bottle. And when Tohru had gotten uneasy and tried to move away, Fujishima had been unwilling and clung to him. While he repeated himself, his cheeks were grasped down. "Uh, now, wait just... just a—" But even as he said this, something cool was pressed against his lips. Tohru pulled his head away forcibly, but was quickly drawn near, and lips were gently pressed to his. Fujishima was drunk beyond the point of discrimination. Even as Tohru struggled like a fly caught in a spider's web, he returned the kisses at Fujishima's request. Twice, three times, four times... it didn't feel bad, even though he knew he was dealing with another man. To be honest, on the contrary, the touch of his lips was pleasant.

Before long, Fujishima stopped moving with

his cheek placed against Tohru's. His regular breathing as he slept tickled Tohru's ear. Tohru carefully raised himself up, put the blanket over the slumbering man, and left the living room.

As soon as he entered his room, he collapsed on the bed. His head was on fire. He hardly thought he was a virgin, but even so...he'd been turned on, even though his partner was a man. When he closed his eyes, he saw visions of Fujishima's face kissing him on the head. He was always so expressionless, yet he'd stared at Tohru so seductively. His expression had been inviting. Fujishima was drunk; he couldn't have known Tohru was his partner. If he had, he would never have kissed Tohru like that.

Recalling the vivid sensation of Fujishima's tongue, Tohru unconsciously pressed his palm to his mouth. After anguishing in bed, he softly touched at his crotch, where the heat had not subsided a bit. He'd recently been fantasizing about pinning down actresses he fancied in bed. But now images of the man he'd just kissed overlaid their eyes and lips, and there was nothing he could do about it.

He awoke to a knock at his door. Covered head to toe under the sheets, he gave only a drowsy "Yes..." in response. He still wanted to sleep some more.

"May I come in?"

At the sound of Fujishima's voice, Tohru leapt up in panic. "Uh, sure! Please."

The door opened with a click. Wearing black cotton trousers and a grey sweater, his hair and

expression flawless as usual, Fujishima slowly stepped into the room.

"Were you asleep?"

His gaze passed over Tohru's slumber-mussed bed. On top of that, Tohru had gone to sleep fully dressed, so his shirt and pants were all wrinkled. Ashamed of his untidy room being seen, Tohru hung his head and replied, "Yeah..."

"Sorry I woke you up. It's nothing that important. We can talk about it later..."

"No, go ahead. I'm already awake." Fujishima leaned forward slightly and appeared to think things through first, then raised his head. His eyes, looking straight at Tohru, showed no trace of yesterday's seductive prurience.

"Er... sorry about everything."

At the sudden apology for the kissing, Tohru blushed deeply.

"Uh, th-that's okay. It was no big deal..."

That was a lie—it WAS a big deal. If it truly wasn't, he'd be able to look Fujishima straight in the face. The sensations returned vividly. The indescribable sensation of those lips, those thin, cool lips, lightly gripping and sucking on his own upper lip. The tip of that tongue tracing against his firmly shut teeth, as though pleading to go further in. He'd been so comforted, yet the mere memory made his nether regions throb.

"I was rather drunk too, so I got emotional." If he hadn't been drunk, he probably wouldn't have delivered such intense, indiscriminate kisses. "I'm sorry to have given you such unpleasant memories. I didn't

consider your feelings..."

"Look, it's really okay." The repeated apologies made him extremely embarrassed. Tohru looked down to conceal his flushed face.

"Thanks for letting me use this." He held out the blanket Tohru had placed on the soundly sleeping man in the living room. "Apparently, I was so dead drunk I didn't even notice that you'd come back or lent me the blanket."

"Huh?" Tohru asked back stupidly. "Didn't you wake up when I came back? You told me, 'Welcome home.'"

This time, Fujishima looked confused. "I said that?"

"You sure did."

Fujishima tilted his head repeatedly, but ultimately muttered, "I don't remember..."

"If you don't remember, why are you apologizing to me?"

"Because I thought I was at fault. I had no right to stop you from going to meet with people you knew before you lost your memory..." In the intensity of the kisses, Tohru had utterly forgotten the argument that had caused him to run off. "I was drunk... did I do anything so rude to you as to require apology?"

Tohru had no idea what to say to those enquiring eyes. Fujishima didn't remember those fierce kisses.... Beyond getting drunk, he'd only surprised Tohru, not done any actual harm. How would he react if Tohru told him the truth, that he'd clung to Tohru and kissed him so much Tohru's lips had swollen? He wasn't the sort



of man to receive such news lightly with an "Oh, sorry, I was drunk...." Considering his earnest character, he would blame himself for turning nasty when drunk and apologize so much it would make Tohru uncomfortable. They'd quarreled yesterday; now it was today. Their relationship was awkward at the best of times. He didn't want it going all weird because of some accidental kiss.

...the conclusion made itself plain. Fujishima had forgotten. He would move forward without generating any unpleasant feelings.

"Nothing much. ...you were drinking straight from the bottle and rolling the empties around the floor."

The other man's face turned deep red. "My apologies for such a disgraceful display." Biting his lip and slowly lowering his head, Fujishima then left the room as if he were escaping. Tohru lightly brushed the hair at the back of his head and drew a breath. He'd gotten that bad a reaction just over drinking straight from the bottle. He was sure that if he'd said they'd kissed, Fujishima would have fainted from excessive shame.

He looked at his watch which read 1:00 p.m. He'd come fully awake while they talked. He changed his clothes, washed his face and went into the living room, where Fujishima was sitting on the sofa and reading the newspaper. He noticed Tohru had entered and looked down awkwardly, as if prolonging the lingering memories of a few moments ago.

Vividly recalling the kisses of several hours ago, Tohru lightly slapped his own cheek, trying anything to correct his thoughts from flowing in that direction.

Looking out around him, he saw no sign of the sake bottles that had been behind Fujishima's inebriation. Fujishima had probably cleaned them up.

He remembered the present he'd brought back from the convenience store yesterday. "Um, was there a cake lying around here?"

"I put it in the refrigerator," Fujishima replied without raising his head from the newspaper.

"Oh, thanks." He opened the refrigerator door, and there sat the cake on the middle shelf. He wondered if it was worth it now... but he could see it remaining uneaten and getting tossed out if he let it lie. Perhaps it would be better to throw it out, but if Fujishima WOULD eat it... and as he considered this, he took out the cake.

"Here you go." Tohru offered the cake, still in its plastic case, to Fujishima. The man raised his head from the paper and made a puzzled expression.

"...for me?"

"Uh, yeah." There was no need for him to say he'd been hoping to use it as an opportunity to make amends.

"You're okay with eating sweet stuff, aren't you, Mr. Fujishima?" Fujishima didn't reach for it, but continued to look perplexed. "I didn't think so. Sorry about that." As he started to take back the cake, however, Fujishima's right hand reached out hesitantly.

"No, I like sweet food. But why all of a sudden...?"

"Um, yeah, well... I'm not sure why. So don't worry about it, just eat it, please."

"Thank you." In expressing his gratitude,

Fujishima accepted the cake with a bearing far more polite than Tohru's in his simplistic offering. He stared at the strawberry shortcake in its package and smiled softly. "Let's put on some coffee. You can have share the cake too."

Fujishima carried the cake into the kitchen. Tohru had eaten nothing that afternoon and was surprised to have cake as his first meal of the day, but he couldn't even manage the simple phrase, "I'm fine, thanks," to the man who was happily making preparations. The cake, which cost two for 350 yen at most, was tidily removed from its cellophane wrapping and brought out elegantly on plates.

"Thank you. I appreciate the meal." Fujishima placed the cake and coffee on the low table and, having thanked Tohru once again, picked up a fork. As he drank his coffee, Tohru absently watched Fujishima eat.

As Fujishima put each fragment of cake in his mouth, his normally unexpressive face broke into a joyful smile. He bit and digested slowly so as to savor it. He stuck to eating the cake, never touching his coffee. A rapt, beatific expression remained on his normally antisocial face the entire time he ate.

Tohru sampled the very corner of this so-delicious object, but the sugar-sweet creme left an aftertaste he didn't like, so he washed it down with the coffee.

Once he'd finished the cake, Fujishima finally reached for his coffee. Then he noticed Tohru's plate, which was practically untouched.

"You're not having any?"

"Um, well..." he prevaricated. He worried over Fujishima's gaze, which was fixed on the cake. "Er, you can have mine if you don't mind a little bite out of it." He pushed the cake plate towards Fujishima, who shook his head, flustered.

"No, that's all right. That's your portion. You eat it."

"Stuff like cake really isn't my thing. I'd considered throwing it out, but that would've been a waste, so..."

Even though he'd just offered it, he was pretty sure Fujishima wouldn't go for food someone else had already sampled, but Fujishima stared at the cake down by his hand and absently muttered, "In that case, maybe I should eat it..."

He stuffed the second piece into his mouth with equal relish and bit down. When he'd eaten about half of it, Fujishima noticed Tohru's gaze. His face reddened, and he put the fork and plate down on the table and hung his head.

"You sure you won't have the rest?" He blushed all the way to the tips of his ears when he asked.

"...you probably think I'm a very strange man to enjoy eating cake like that." His voice verged on inaudibility. For some reason, Tohru regarded his embarrassed appearance with pity.

"There's nothing strange about liking sweet stuff. And all the famous pastry chefs are usually men, right?"

Though consoled, Fujishima made no move to pick up his fork. Tohru felt from the bottom of his heart

that he'd been right not to mention the kissing incident to a man of such delicate nerves that he would stop eating because of a look.

"You like sweet stuff, right?"

Fujishima didn't answer. A short while passed before Tohru noticed that the question had struck an added blow to his shame. "I'd never seen you eat sweets before now, so..." but the more Tohru said, the deeper a hole he felt he was digging, so he fell silent too.

"My mother was very strict at home. She never let me have sweets because I'd get cavities. Sort of in reaction to that, I got to like them, especially Western-type confections like cake, but it's tough for a man to walk into a pastry shop by himself..."

Fujishima went on in subdued tones. Tohru felt he could understand Fujishima's embarrassment at entering stores that sold cakes and similar by himself. He loved them, but couldn't buy them on his own—no wonder he'd seemed so happy even with this cheap cake.

"Please, eat it all," Tohru pleaded with him. "I'm sure that cake's life dream was for you to eat it."

"But..."

"Please."

It was only a piece of cake. It hardly mattered if it wasn't finished off. Yet he wanted Fujishima to eat it. "Please, eat it. Please," Tohru repeated, and Fujishima, unable to hide his bafflement, looked around at random and, looking like a small animal, cornered and helpless, he picked up his fork. Looking at Tohru as if waiting for his gaze, Fujishima's fingers trembled slightly.

He opened his mouth and welcomed in the cake. His lips tasted the fork. His tongue flickered briefly in view. Remembering that red, moist, warm object licking him so insistently, Tohru sought to wipe away the resurgent sensation around his mouth with the back of his hand.

When he'd finished eating, Fujishima put his hands together and said, "Thank you for the meal," with a very earnest expression. Some creme from the cake was stuck to the cheek of his upturned face. Creme on the cheek of that flawless face. The incongruity was so funny that Tohru couldn't suppress a chuckle, at which Fujishima's expression suddenly turned miserable.

"Why are you laughing?"

Leaning across the table, Tohru wiped off the creamed cheek with his index finger. Fujishima pulled back in surprise and blushed like a woman.

"Oh, sorry. You had some creme on your cheek."

Trembling, Fujishima rubbed at the cheek Tohru had touched and stood up from the sofa. He then left the living room without saying a word.

Abruptly, Tohru considered that Fujishima might like him. He didn't know why. He had no basis for the thought... just the vague idea.

After 5:00 p.m., he changed out with the evening shift. Tohru finished changing, slung his daypack over his shoulder, and was headed out of the store from the side of the checkout counter when he was spotted and approached by Haruka, a college student working there

part-time who pinned her forelocks aslant across her forehead like a child. "It's freezing out there, Tohru!" she said, constantly rubbing her pink fingertips together.

"That cold?"

"Uh-huh. Looks like snow." Haruka turned back at the entrance, but spotted the ribbons cutely decorating the product shelves beyond the register counter and uttered a surprised, "Huh?"

"When did they put up the Valentine's paraphernalia? Oh, that's right, today's the first of February, isn't it."

Inexpensive chocolates in the 500-yen range were sensibly arranged on the shelves. The holiday goods never came out this early, but in their own way, they could boost the customers' enthusiasm. Haruka glanced up at Tohru.

"You've got a bike, right, Tohru? I bet the mornings are cold. Should I get you some gloves or a scarf for a Valentine's present?"

"Huh? Oh, that's okay, I've got my own." As he demurred, he felt a heavy weight on his back. There was an odor of Lucky Strikes.

"Tohru's a man with his defenses perfected, Haruka, honey. He's got the gloves, the scarf, and a knit cap besides." Kusuda gave a leery grin and added "Right?" from next to his ear.

"It's cold. What's the big deal? Why are you here, anyway? Your shift doesn't start 'til nighttime."

"I'm here as a customer! Thought I'd help boost sales. Plus I ain't seen you in a while, so I've been oh so lonely."

"...we saw each other yesterday morning. What are you talking about?"

Watching their exchange, Haruka muttered, "You two are sure good friends."

"Nah, we're queers. Right?"

"What? Gross!" Haruka frowned at Kusuda's joke.

"Quit being such an ass. See ya." Shaking off the man stuck to his back, Tohru left the store. He unlocked his mountain bike from the employees-only bike rack out back, took his gloves out of his pocket and put them on, and raced down the street in the opposite direction from the apartment complex. He'd mastered the front of the train station. The only direction he hadn't gone yet was to the north. However, he couldn't go very far after work was over.

Since the beginning of January, Tohru had switched from night to afternoon shift at his job. It didn't pay as well, but it meant he could live life a little more normally, being active in the daytime and sleeping at night. Considering the time required to prepare dinner, he stole a glance at his wristwatch. He decided he follow the northbound road for just fifteen minutes and started pedaling for all he was worth. The evening roads were filled with cars and people. He raced along, threading his way through narrow gaps. He'd fallen in love with the mountain bike the moment he saw it in the front of the secondhand store and bought it after haggling down the price. He'd taken a clear hit in job earnings, but his travel range had expanded markedly. He'd gotten to know the roads traveling around the apartment house

where he lived, and he was rapidly constructing a new map in his head. That was fun, too.

Making maps wasn't his main purpose for buying it, though. As he rode around on his bike, he paid close attention to the signboards. Light tones, cute, and English lettering... those were the features he sought, but he didn't find them. Away from the station, the shops became sparse, and he was on the verge of turning back when he finally found the place.

"France Pastry Port." The letters on the rusty signboard were of retro design. The shop was old and small. The facade was tiled, while the lighting within was arranged in the shape of an orange lily of the valley. He stopped his bike, intending to do some "reconnaissance," and went inside.

Instantly, the cloyingly sweet smell of creme struck at his nostrils. The showcase was filled to overflowing with cakes, cakes, and more cakes. That so many still remained at this time in the evening indicated this wasn't the most popular of shops.

Gateau chocolat, tiramisu, creme brulee...until he started frequenting Western-style pastry shops, strawberry shortcake was the only kind of cake that ever came to mind when he heard the word. And the cakes carefully wrapped in foil or cellophane were each labeled in overly long English lettering, so he'd nearly bit his tongue several times when he first tried ordering them. No, he actually HAD bitten it and automatically let out a yelp that caused the girl behind the counter to laugh. Now an order for "one Lubecker Nuss-Sahnetorte and a Charlotte aux poires" just rolled off his tongue. He

was practically a cake-buying pro.

After a brief look through the showcase, he bought a strawberry shortcake and a chiboust. A middle-aged man dressed in white, looking very much like an artisan, rang him up at the register. His face was sullen, not even offering a courtesy smile, and he handed over the change without ceremony. Tohru heard a "Thank you very much" from behind him as he left the shop, but strangely, it sounded to him like "Don't come back."

He steered the bike with one hand so as not to jostle the box, which is why he always biked a little more slowly when returning from a cake purchase than he did on the way out.

Making the rounds of the Western pastry shops on his mountain bike after work had become a daily routine. Every day, Tohru would buy a cake to bring home, but he never ate a bite. The sweet confections all went into the stomach of his roommate. At first, Fujishima was diffident about Tohru bringing in these after-dinner snacks, but as it became routine, his reservations gradually weakened, and recently he'd even come to show signs of anticipation.

Fujishima might be too embarrassed to go into a Western pastry shop by himself, but Tohru was perfectly fine with it. He just had to maintain an expression that said, "I'm a customer." The people around him didn't care nearly as much as he did that he was a man. Naturally, he became a familiar face in those places he visited frequently, and he'd been told, "My, you must like cake." It was a little embarrassing, but only for an instant.

Since the big argument when he'd run off from the apartment, Fujishima hadn't said a word about photography. He'd relaxed some, but he felt like he'd abandoned the idea somewhere. He'd been disgusted with his inconsistent self, then finally amused. No matter which way he went, he was dissatisfied. Though nothing further was said about it, he hardly spent his days in peace. He had to make sure of his future. As usual, however, a thick, white curtain remained before his eyes. He was spinning his wheels in impatience.

During his uncertain irritation, he found the sight of Fujishima's face when Fujishima was eating cake to be strangely calming. Fujishima loved cake, and his face was enraptured at the mere sight of the colorful Western confections on their small plates. Once he included his mouth in the experience, his cheeks slackened in an expression of extreme bliss. He was always so expressionless; only when he got in front of cake did his face become a mirror eloquently reflecting what was in his heart. When Tohru considered it was the cakes he bought that produced such delighted expressions, he was able to think that even he could please someone.

That evening, Fujishima put on some coffee after dinner was over. Ever since Tohru had started bringing cakes home, it had practically become a custom for the two of them to have after-dinner coffee in the living room.

"Today's choices might not taste that good," Tohru said, verbally restraining Fujishima before his roommate could reach for the items. Fujishima looked at him, fork in hand. "It was an older shop, and they had a

lot of stock left at the end of the day..."

"Every cake you buy for me is delicious." It was a very nice thing to say, even if he'd said it without expression. Tohru jerkily averted his face... because he knew his cheeks were turning red. But when he turned away like that, he could no longer see his greatest delight, "the glory of Fujishima's snack." He took deep breaths so the burning sensation in his face would go away, when Fujishima spoke to him.

"Why don't you have some too?" The cake was presented to him, a small bite taken out of one corner. Tohru's delight withered away completely, and he slowly furrowed his brow.

"Does it taste that bad?"

Fujishima laughed. "Not at all. It's incredibly good. I've never had such cake before." He said it was delicious, but it had been an old shop, and they'd had all that leftover stock. Half-believing, half-doubting, Tohru borrowed Fujishima's fork and took a mouthful. The whipped cream was dense but not sweet, while the sponge cake was moist yet fluffy. The texture was so tender he'd never tasted anything like it. "Good, isn't it."

It looked like a run-of-the-mill strawberry shortcake, but the taste was so exquisite, he almost moaned involuntarily.

"...mm-hm."

Satisfied with Tohru's reply, Fujishima grinned. He then became engrossed in eating the cake, continuously muttering, "Mm, good," all the while. Normally, Tohru felt good himself seeing Fujishima's

face so joyful, but it wasn't fun at all today. On the contrary, all he felt in his heart was a strange, murky sense of dissatisfaction.

After he'd gone to bed, he mulled over why he hadn't enjoyed seeing Fujishima's face that day, but he didn't know the reason. The next day, he went to the same pastry shop and bought some different cakes. That night, when Fujishima came home from work, he went straight to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. "Is this from the same shop as yesterday's?" he asked, which somehow irritated Tohru.

That day was another failure. When he watched Fujishima's face looking so satisfied with the cake, he instead became angry. Again he pondered why this was so, and finally he arrived at the apparent cause: Fujishima wasn't enjoying the cakes because Tohru had bought them, but because they were delicious. He wasn't the one bringing joy to that face, those delicious cakes were.

The next day, he went to a different shop on purpose. When Fujishima came home and opened the refrigerator door, he noticed the cake box was from a different store and looked disappointed. While Tohru disliked Fujishima getting his supreme look of enjoyment from eating cake, he disliked making Fujishima look disappointed even more.

Ultimately, Tohru found himself in the unpleasant position of going back to the shop Fujishima liked. It wasn't that he simply wanted to be jealous of all the food, but it was clear that the colorful confections in that show window had more power to delight Fujishima



than he did.

On Sunday, he had a day off from work, so he went to the pastry shop in the afternoon instead of the evening. As usual, the shop was practically devoid of customers, and there was no sign that the stock of cakes being sold had decreased at all.

"A Sacher torte and a strawberry tart," he said with a bluntness to match that of the old man who worked there. The man was used to it; his hands treated the cake gently, and he handed over Tohru's change with infinite casualness. The wordless battle was concluded, but the instant Tohru opened the shop door, he collided head-on with someone who was trying to come in. Tohru stepped back unsteadily from the impact, ultimately failed to regain his balance, and fell flat on his backside on the floor. His hand automatically opened, and the box with its cakes inside went rolling around the floor like a die.

"Oh, my goodness, I'm so sorry! Are you all right?" The person with whom he'd collided was an elegant-appearing woman who sometimes ran the register at the shop. She came up to him, looking concerned.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Smiling, he bounced back to his feet. He was all right, but...he picked up the box that had briefly become a die. He gently shook it side to side, but it didn't make a sound. The cakes were completely destroyed.

"I'm SO sorry—I'll replace those right away." The woman took the box from Tohru and went behind the counter.

"Um, I'll be happy to pay..." It was impossible to say who was at fault in the accident, but the woman shook her head and insisted he needn't pay again. He wondered if she were the shopowner's wife. Unlike the blunt man, she had a gentle demeanor, was polite, and always smiled. The woman put a new Sacher torte and strawberry tart, along with a mille-feuille, into two boxes.

"Er, I wasn't buying a mille-feuille."

"That's all right. It's to make up for smacking into you. Besides, you've bought something here every day for about two weeks now. Think of it as a free bonus."

Grinning, she offered over the boxes with a "Here you are." Tohru thanked her and accepted them, and then she asked, "Do you always eat our cakes?"

"No, my friend does. My friend loves the cakes here, always says how good they are..."

"Is that so?" The woman squinted happily. "Are you a student?"

"No, I, er...work part-time..."

Chiming in with another "Is that so," the woman came out from behind the counter. "Sorry to be asking so many questions. And...pardon if you think I'm rude for asking, but would you like to work part-time here?"

Tohru's eyes bugged out at the sudden offer. "Uh, I..." He'd known about the "Help Wanted" sign that was pasted up in the front of the store, but it was torn and yellowed, so he hadn't imagined they were actively looking to hire. As he stood there unable to reply, the woman sighed, "Ah well, I didn't think so..."

"I'm going into the hospital next month. It's only for minor surgery, but it means I'll be away for a month, and I'm worried about the shop..."

"We don't need no part-timers here!" a voice roared from the back of the shop. Tohru automatically straightened up, and the woman heaved another sigh.

"He's simply impossible when it comes to receiving customers. His intentions are normal, but the customers get mad and leave. It really is a problem. Could you perhaps ask if your friend wants to work part-time in a cake shop?"

Tohru was used to his job at the convenience store, but there were plenty of other such part-time jobs available. And yet if no one helped out at this shop, they really would be in trouble. They were so at their wits' end, they'd had to approach a customer they barely knew...

The shop was small and old, but it did please him a bit that they'd "requested" him. Besides, this was a Western-style pastry shop, a shop that sold the cakes Fujishima loved so much. On top of that, they told him he could bring home as much of the day's leftover stock as he liked. That meant he could bring home Fujishima's cakes without worrying about his spending money.

...it didn't take long for Tohru to restore diplomatic relations with the cakes he'd been regarding so hatefully.

That night, after finishing up a quiet dinner free of flying small talk with Fujishima, Tohru slowly broached the subject.

"I quit my job at the convenience store today."

Fujishima raised his head from looking down. He set down his chopsticks, sat up straight, and set himself in a posture for conversing. Sitting so attentively, he seemed oddly on guard for a conversation partner.

"Starting tomorrow, I'll be working part time at the Port pastry shop. That's the shop where I'm always buying cakes. I'll still be getting home at the same time."

Fujishima's brow suddenly wrinkled, showing he was thinking this through.

Tohru waited with slowly growing tension for his roommate's next words.

"Is this something you want to do?"

It wasn't so much what he wanted to do; he'd just changed jobs from the convenience store to the pastry shop. What he'd needed was to be able to think of it as more meaningful than work at the convenience store, for which there were so many alternatives.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that, but I did think it's a better job..."

After a long silence, Fujishima muttered, "If it's something you want to do, then I think you should try it." He hadn't objected, but it hardly seemed he'd wholeheartedly approved of working in a pastry shop, either. What could this man be expecting of him? What could he do that would satisfy him? Since the argument, they'd both maintained silence on the subject of photography. Fujishima hadn't told Tohru to find anything. However, though Fujishima said nothing, Tohru still felt a sort of silent pressure.

Pretending not to notice the oppressive

atmosphere, Tohru responded brightly to Fujishima's somehow reluctant expression with, "I'll bring home lots of the leftover cakes."

It was a cold evening with a north wind blowing, and Tohru was racing his bike as fast as he could. It was now March, but there was no sign of the cold letting up as expected; instead, mornings continued to be below freezing, turning the puddles to ice.

The road surface was frozen in the mornings too, and he'd crashed twice since the start of the month. He felt awkward about it, so he'd said nothing to Fujishima, but the latter had spotted the scrapes on Tohru's arms anyway. He'd enquired about the reasons for the wounds, and after Tohru confessed it was from falling off his bike, he threw in a little humor with "If I fell and hit my head, I might get my memories back, so it might work out my favor." Fujishima had kept a straight face and bought him a biking helmet the next day. "I'm not in junior high..." Tohru had thought, but he couldn't ignore Fujishima's consideration, so he always wore it traveling to and from work.

One day, turning right from the shopping district, he spotted someone wearing a long coat from behind. There was something familiar about him, so he pulled alongside the person just to make sure.

"Mr. Fujishima?" The man stopped in surprise and turned around. "You going home now? You're early."

"I was working outside the office today, so they told me just to go straight home when I was done."



Fujishima glanced at his watch. "Is your work over for today too?"

"That's right. The cakes sold out, so the shop closed early. There was a graduation ceremony at a local high school too, so they let out early. The shop's been a big success since they got in such a great salesman. The schoolgirls just come pouring to get a look at my handsome self..."

"I see," Fujishima chimed in, his face utterly deadpan. Jokes were lost on him, so Tohru often didn't get the reaction he was hoping to achieve. Just now, for instance, he was hoping Fujishima would laugh off his comment with, "I thought seeing you would cause a DROP in business." Embarrassed at having told a joke that missed so badly, Tohru looked down.

"That was a joke just now."

"Was it?"

"Yes, it was. There's no way I could be a draw for customers."

Even as Tohru mentally rolled his eyes, he offered the box in his right hand to Fujishima. "Perfect timing. Here, take this home. We sold out today, so I couldn't secure more than one.... I'm off to buy groceries for making dinner."

"Understood. Thanks for everything." It was just his everyday offer, yet Fujishima never forgot to thank Tohru. He treated those mere cakes as if they were priceless jewels. Tohru felt it was as if that consideration was for him, which made him very happy. After parting with Fujishima, he plunged on in good humor into the shopping district to engage in closely contested

bargaining battles with the housewives there.

Tohru had recently been on a stew kick, so the stewpot had been appearing on the dinner table once every three days. Stews were simple to prepare and tasted great, and he could get infinite variations just by changing the ingredients. His friend, the woman who ran the fishmonger's, pushed oysters on him, insisting, "They're a bargain," so dinner ended up being oyster dote-nabe.

"This means the old man gripes every time he sees me. He's forever throwing fits over the smallest things, and boy, does he have a temper. I'm pretty sure his wife's fought with him plenty of times."

"Is that so..." Fujishima started blowing on the oysters to cool them off. Tohru had noticed Fujishima's sensitivity to hot foods only recently when he'd started making more stews.

"Recently he's offered to teach me how to make cakes. I'm a little interested, but anytime I get drawn into the conversation, he works me like a dog, until I've had enough and feel like I'm gonna blow my stack, so it puts me off!"

Fujishima regularly made encouraging noises of acknowledgement as he chewed his food.

"What would happen if I became a pastry chef? You could have all the cakes you wanted every day, Mr. Fujishima!"

The expressionless face softened slightly. Tohru was tickled at his lack of guile.

"I thought about making cakes, but the prep

work would probably take a while."

"You'd have to wake up early?"

"Right now I'm getting up at 5:00 a.m., and that's tough as it is. Maybe I should hold off 'til it gets warmer. But cakes are such a mystery! Just one display makes them look so much more refined and delicious! The old man's a real stickler for the ingredients in the cakes he makes, and they taste out of this world, but they have this overall "simple but sturdy" feel to them and... how can I put it... there's no "gentle dreams" about them. The shop's all plain and subdued, too. So I used displays from other shops as reference to give the inside of the place a cuter feel, and business picked up just like that."

"Now that you mention it, the signboard's new too, isn't it."

Tohru leaned over the table. "You've seen it, Mr. Fujishima?"

"I've passed by the shop when running errands outside the office. The old sign was all rusted, but it's been switched out for a stylish one."

"That's the one I picked out. The old man said, "Maybe we should get a new signboard," so I used other stores as reference and recommended one. The old man complained it was too expensive..."

"I see."

Before, Tohru had thought talking during meals was forbidden. When Tohru first got his job at Port, the old man's assault of unsociability had driven his stress through the roof. Then Fujishima had happened to ask him "How's your job at the cake shop?" over dinner. That was all it took—Tohru forgot all about having

dinner as he complained at length about the treatment he'd been receiving. Fujishima had looked surprised, but listened through to the end, interjecting an "I see" now and then in response.

Since that incident, Tohru had noticed that it wasn't as if Fujishima didn't talk at meals, he simply didn't talk unless Tohru started the conversation. Since that day, Tohru no longer had reservations about talking during meals. Fujishima listened seriously to matters great and small—how the old man had come to work with his pants on backwards because his wife, who had seen to his personal appearance, had gone into the hospital; how Tohru offered boyfriend advice to the high-school girls who now frequented the shop; how he'd held a big roundup when some pigeons flew into the shop; how pretty the sky was today; or how tomorrow would be freezing.... Even though Tohru felt he was acting like a little kid, he wanted to talk about everything that happened that day, and he wanted to have someone listen.

While Tohru carried the conversation, Fujishima would finish his meal, but would not stand. He would wait until Tohru was done. Noticing this, Tohru would get flustered and bolt down his cooled food. While Tohru tidied up, Fujishima would sit on the living room sofa, reading the paper or watching the news. Unless he was eating cake, these were his only two activities there.

The previous week, Fujishima had bought a rug. The day before, Tohru had scratched up the floor with the sofa legs when he'd been cleaning. He'd meekly apologized to Fujishima, and the next day, the rug had

shown up in the living room. Since the wooden flooring tended to get cold, Tohru had been wanting one for some time anyway, at least for right around the sofa, but since it would have meant spending money, he'd never been able to bring it up.

The deep green rug was pleasant to touch and made him feel he was standing on grass. As items were added little by little, the living room, which had once been so dreary, acquired the feel of a place where people actually lived. Of course, there still was very little in it, but it still felt more comfortable than his own room.

Once he was done with the clean-up, Tohru would sit down opposite the other man. They would pass the time quietly, sometimes talking, sometimes reading books or watching TV. Fujishima usually did the reading; Tohru didn't care much for the printed word, so he watched TV. While he watched the news, Tohru glanced at the other man. He was lonely, as he couldn't get Fujishima to converse with him while Fujishima was concentrating on his reading, but just being next to the man soothed Tohru.

Thus the night wore on, and he hated the moment when Fujishima stood up and retired to his room. He was lonely when left by himself. He didn't like being alone. Yet he could never bring himself to say anything so childish as that he wanted to be with Fujishima because he felt lonely.

"Takahisa." He'd thought Fujishima had been reading a book, but the man was staring right at him. "Do you enjoy your job?" It was a concise question.

"Yeah."

The man smiled. "That's all right, then."

Fujishima's gaze returned to his book. Tohru pretended to watch TV, pondering the meaning of that question. His job WAS fun. He got discouraged when yelled at, but was happy to be praised, and the old man was not a bad person at heart. Besides, he belonged there too.

A little while passed after that conversation, then he heard a thud. Fujishima's book had fallen down by the foot of the sofa. Its reader was lying on the sofa with his eyes shut. His relaxed arm drooped loosely toward the floor. "Guess he was tired," thought Tohru, looking at the pale, downturned cheeks.

Turning off the TV, he just sat there for a while, until it was past midnight. He stood up from the sofa, planning to wake Fujishima. But the man was sleeping so pleasantly, Tohru wasn't sure whether it was better to wake him or not. After wavering for a bit, he turned up the living room heater a little, then fetched a blanket and three photograph albums from his room.

Tohru put the blanket over the sleeping man, then sat down by his feet. He opened a photo album. It was the only way he could think of quietly killing time. He didn't leave the room, because he felt it was lonely when one woke up alone. He didn't know how it was for Fujishima, but he knew he himself would definitely be lonely.

The wind rattled at the window. He remembered the face of the fishwife at Uomaru telling him "It's gonna snow tomorrow!" "There's a cold front coming through," she'd said as she pushed Tohru to buy oysters,

"so it's definitely gonna snow..."

Their relationship was a mystery, he thought. One could say they were friends, but in some ways they were so formal and reserved with each other that they were practically strangers. Even if he hadn't had that many close relationships before he'd lost his memory, it was clear to him that Fujishima currently cherished him. Even if he was an awkward person and couldn't come right out and say certain things...

Fujishima wouldn't tell him much about the past. Surely it didn't matter if Tohru didn't know what Fujishima didn't tell him. He'd gone searching for his past self and found, contrary to his expectations, he'd been a very disagreeable person. Nothing had brought back his past memories, but he figured that if nothing did, then that was that. He wanted to know what his old self thought and felt, but he also felt that there'd be nothing he could do even if he did know.

He really enjoyed his current life. The old man had asked Tohru to be his apprentice, though he might have been joking. He'd quit his convenience store job, but Kusuda often came by to buy cakes. When he came home, his own chair was always there, and there was food to eat. This was where he belonged.

Four months ago, he would never have believed that he'd become so close to a desolate living room and an expressionless man. Setting down the photograph collection, Tohru peeked at Fujishima's face. He was still sleeping pleasantly. Now and then, his long eyelashes would flutter.

"Does this expressionless, awkward, cake-

loving man like me?" he wondered. "Does he like me enough to want to kiss me even when he isn't drunk?"

He wanted to know how Fujishima felt, but what about himself? Even now, he sometimes recalled those passionate kisses. Every time he did, his body heated up. He hadn't masturbated to thoughts of Fujishima more than once or twice. Fujishima's sleeping face would overlay his fantasies, and he'd become embarrassed and avert his gaze.

Could this be love? Just because he made someone the object of his masturbation didn't mean it led to direct love. Fujishima becoming the object of his fantasies was a conditioned response to those apparently accidental kisses. If those kisses hadn't happened, the idea of feeling love would never have entered his head, would it?

Fujishima had spilled red ink into a transparent cup filled with water. Once it had been spilled, he could not undo what had happened. The red ripples slowly spread throughout the cup, mixing together into a faint tinge that looked like it would disappear but could not. The emotion now permeated throughout him.

Even if he ignored the love... he wanted Fujishima to care, wanted him to smile, wanted to make him happy, wanted him to listen to him.

The sleeping form stirred a little. His lips parted slightly, and Tohru thought he saw his red tongue flick into view, then they closed again. Tohru's lower body ached throbbingly. He used his reason to suppress the outrageous urge to strip Fujishima naked and kiss him. Tohru smiled wryly. Wanting to kiss Fujishima, holding

himself back, he must be quite a funny sight, trembling like a dog told to wait before eating a treat. Surely you could call this love, after all.

If there was a spring in his heart filling up with the feeling of love, he wanted to see it. He wanted to see what couldn't be seen.

He wondered if the man's sleeping eyelids were tightly shut, and as if in reaction, they slowly opened. Moist, black eyes stared vacantly at him.

"Takahisa."

Abruptly, Tohru came back to himself from the outrageous expectation that it might be all right to kiss him. He was too close; his face was no more than twenty centimeters away.

"...you're drooling." It was a reason for being at point-blank range. He'd told a lie to fool him. The man blushed and wiped around his mouth. "Gotcha."

Realizing he'd been fooled, Fujishima turned even redder, lowered his head and in a trembling voice mumbled, "Please don't tease me..."

That night, Tohru had a dream, a very realistic dream. Fujishima came into the room and suddenly started taking off his clothes. He invited Tohru boldly with a "Do whatever you want," and yet when it came down to it, Tohru was enflamed by Fujishima looking so virginally shy, and he sprang at the man. His hips moved forward into unknown territory, and they had sex-like animals.

He awoke in the middle of the night, and while he was changing his underwear, he felt unspeakable guilt, the guilt that came from staining something

clean and pure. He tossed his soiled underwear into the washing machine and went to the toilet. On his way back, he passed by Fujishima's room. He thought about the object of his rape fantasy being behind that door, and his body incorrigibly became aroused. The fire would not go out, so he returned to the toilet once again.

Hating himself, he sat down on the toilet seat. Suddenly, he wondered what kind of dreams Fujishima was having.

At the shop, he smoothly packed the cakes into one of the biggest boxes. The inside of the box, filled to capacity by the multicolor-decorated cakes, rattled like someone had upended a canister of candy drops into it. He closed the lid on the box of dreams, then stuck on a seal embossed with the store's name as an extra touch.

"You've really gotten the hang of this," Kusuda murmured in admiration from the other side of the showcase.

"That's 'cause I'm a pro." He was shocked at how he sniffed with pride, talking so well of himself. Sure, his fingers moved dexterously now, but he'd been terrible when he started out. He hadn't been used to the soft texture of the cakes and gripped them too strongly, leaving unnatural dents in the sides. He'd tensed up putting the cakes into boxes and ended up toppling them like dominos and smashing them. He'd secretly rung up the cost of the smashed cakes into the register and had them for lunch, but just his luck, the old man had caught him. Noboru Sakai, the patissier also known as "the old man" and owner of the French pastry shop Port, had

looked into the box, guessed what had happened, and smirked, "So, my cakes taste that good?"

"You're a bumbling klutz," the old man had told Tohru at first, when Tohru had been stiff as a robot handling the cakes. "Cakes are like dames. You'll crush 'em if you hold 'em by the bits that stick out, and you'll break 'em right away if you handle 'em roughly. You gotta treat 'em real gentle and polite."

Tohru didn't feel like getting a lecture on how to treat women from a man who stunned his own wife with how stubborn and blunt he could be, but he gradually learned how to handle the cakes. The cakes the old man made were delicious, but they were plain and unaffected, lacking any glamor. Somehow, the old man himself came through in the things he made.

Tohru's finishing touch was to attach a little bouquet of flowers to the top of the box.

"You stick those on too?" Kusuda looked at Tohru's hands.

"Yep. 'Cause women are sensitive to stuff like the wrapping and outer appearance." Having finished wrapping the box, he placed it on top of the showcase. There was a seminar being launched today, and Kusuda had come to buy cakes for it. There would likely be a lot of women there, so this was an ideal chance for publicity. The cake shop's clientele grew by word of mouth, and the word of mouth of young ladies and older women in particular was essential.

"Okay, listen up. Be sure to let the ladies eat first, even if some of the guys want to dig in. That's because our cakes are really good. And when they ask

you 'Where did you get these cakes?' you hand 'em these slips." Tohru handed Kusuda a large stack pale pink slips of paper the size of business cards, each inscribed with the store's name, phone number and business hours, as well as a map. These had come to be placed in the store at his suggestion.

"It's still winter, but the room will be heated, so be sure to refrigerate them and eat them early on. Okay, I'm counting on you, Mr. Billboard."

"Who are you calling a billboard?"

"We're sorry to put you to all this trouble, Mr. Kusuda."

Mrs. Sakai, who handled the shop's sales and accounting, had heard the conversation and came out from the back. She'd only recently left the hospital, but she was apparently still not fully recovered and almost never came into the shop. She was so magnanimous and gentle, one could only admire how such a good-natured woman had married that obstinate old man.

"Since Mr. Takahisa started working here, you've advertised us to all your friends, which has greatly boosted our business. We've even had some complete sell-out days recently. When I think how it was before, I just can't believe it. Thank you."

"Well, naturally, we're in demand. We use good ingredients, and our cakes taste great. Apart from the old man's personality..."

"Shut yer yap and get to work!" yelled a voice from the back of the shop.

Kusuda's eyes widened.

"I'm sorry," said Mrs. Sakai, her eyes cast down



in apology, "That's just how he is."

"Oh yeah, start by recommending the Fraiser. The custard cream's really good—try one yourself."

Kusuda tilted his head. "I thought you didn't like sweet stuff. Are you tasting them all?"

"All of them would be too much to ask, but I do try them. Mr. Fujishima highly recommends the Fraiser. It's really superb."

"Oh, Mr. Kusuda?" Mrs. Sakai leaned over the checkout counter. "I've been wondering what kind of young lady Mr. Takahisa has for a girlfriend. I've asked, but he won't tell me. She really seems to love cake..."

"Look, I told you it's my MALE friend who loves cake so much. He's my roommate..."

Thanks to Kusuda laughing this off with "A girlfriend? Him?" Mrs. Sakai finally believed he didn't have one. However, she was surprised to learn that he lived with another man who was nearly thirty.

That afternoon it rained, so business slowed down, and there were actually ten shortcakes left when they usually sold out. Mrs. Sakai packed all the extra cakes into a large box and handed them over to Tohru when he'd finished cleaning the shop and was about to go home.

"Is it okay to take so many?"

She smiled broadly. "Even if we left them here, we couldn't sell them tomorrow; we'd just end up throwing them away. I'll be happier knowing they're eaten by someone who said he really likes them. If you have extra, share them with your friend or his girlfriend."

Feeling a sense of incongruity in the world "girlfriend," Tohru left the shop. A girlfriend for Fujishima... he'd never even imagined it before. It wouldn't be odd for him to have one, but Tohru was sure he didn't. He had plenty of basis for this belief. If Fujishima did have a girlfriend, he'd never have taken charge of a friend whose amnesia would be a hindrance and moved in with him. Tohru could count the number of times the phone had rung since he'd started living in that apartment. And yet, Fujishima might...

Wearing his helmet and carrying his daybag and the cake box in his hands, Tohru walked around to the back of the shop, where he spotted a silhouette next to his mountain bike. The last of the rainclouds had made it grow dark quickly, so he couldn't tell who it was. He approached warily in case it was a bike thief. Then he spotted the familiar black long coat. The man who had just been occupying his thoughts so much had been standing vacantly out in the cold.

"What are you doing here?"

"...just passing by," Fujishima muttered. "Since I was here, I figured we'd go home together."

As he realized Fujishima had been waiting for him, his face softened happily. "In that case, you should've come into the store. It's cold out here."

"It's not like I was waiting long."

His right hand, which held his briefcase, looked reddened from the cold, and his lips had turned pale. Tohru was sure this man would say "I just got here," out of worry for Tohru even if he'd been waiting there one or two hours. He took off one of his gloves and handed

it to Fujishima. "Here, use this."

The man shook his head. "I'm fine. You use it."

"Use it to carry the cakes back home. I'll stick one hand in my pocket."

Fujishima protested, but Tohru insistently pushed the glove on him until he gave in and accepted it. He put the glove on his right hand and held the cake box.

"The box is a little heavy today, isn't it."

"So it is."

"It rained today, so we had plenty of cakes left over. Eat all you want."

"...I see." Fujishima's mouth moved as if he had cramps. The cold had even stiffened his smile. Tohru pushed his bike slowly so as to match pace with the walking man. Walking home took about twice as long, but that was fine with him. He was just happy Fujishima had waited to go home together with him.

"Oh, yeah... seems Kusuda's sweet on one of the girls in the seminar..." Talking as they walked along, Tohru noticed that Fujishima was unusually inattentive. Their usual conversational pattern was that he would talk and Fujishima would make small interjections of acknowledgement, but today, even though Fujishima was chiming in, Tohru didn't sense anything in his attitude that said he was listening. His gaze didn't settle down, but instead he kept looking all around him.

"Mr. Fujishima." At hearing his name, the man's back twitched and he raised his head. "Something's wrong about you. Is something bothering you?"

"Not really..." was all Fujishima said. Something

was definitely not normal, though. Talking was pointless when he couldn't get someone to listen, so Tohru shut his mouth. Sunk in mutual silence, they walked the long road home. Tohru was happy they were going home together, but he couldn't shake the feeling he was lonelier than when he was alone.

"Did you..." In the bustling crowds in front of the station, Fujishima abruptly addressed him. "Did you tell anyone from your old job your address and phone number at the apartment?"

"Oh—yeah."

"Why did you tell them?"

Tohru was flustered by the reproachful tone. "Well, I only told one guy."

Apparently, after I left that job, they got several calls at the office for me from some woman. She seemed like someone I knew, so I told them to let me know if she called again. You mean to say Ishii called for me?"

"He did," Fujishima replied, then he looked down, his expression sober.

"Did he say anything?"

"He asked if you were doing all right."

"That's it?"

"Yes."

It had been nearly three months since he visited where he used to live. Ishii hadn't contacted him in all that time. Why would he then call all of a sudden just to see how Tohru had been doing recently? Surely Ishii must have said something else—about the woman who'd been calling for Tohru, for instance...

If Ishii had told him about the woman who'd

been calling, why wouldn't Fujishima say so? Was he hiding it? He had no basis to believe Fujishima was lying, yet he went and imagined about it anyway. He didn't want to know Fujishima's reasons for hiding the matter. After all, he liked Tohru.

If the woman who'd been calling was a lover from before he lost his memory, Fujishima wouldn't like her using getting in touch as an opportunity to get back together with Tohru. He thought what a self-centered person Fujishima was, but at the same time, something bittersweet welled up in his throat. It would be nice if was true. Being jealous and lying were better, more human than being totally unexpressive.

At first, he'd thought he and Fujishima would never have gotten along. During their long time together, though, he felt as if he knew why he'd been friends with this man before he got amnesia. Fujishima wasn't eloquent, skillful, or affectionate. He only rarely smiled, and for a man, he liked cake a lot, and yet...

He looked at the profile of the man walking next to him. He'd only known him for the few months since he'd lost his memory. Yet this man knew a lot about him. Perhaps he also knew about Tohru's past love. He thought it was unfair only he was completely on exhibition, as it were. He wanted to know more about Fujishima.

"Mr. Fujishima?" The man walking next to him looked up. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

In response to the blunt question, Fujishima's face said he wondered why Tohru would ask such a thing, but out loud, he simply replied, "No."

"I thought so," Tohru thought in relief. "But you do like someone."

The reply was a short while in coming. "Mm-hm."

"What sort of person?"

Fujishima came to a halt. He stared at Tohru with his mouth half-open, then looked up at the sky hanging overhead. Snow... snow had started falling. A heavy snow, heavy as rain. Wet snow. Fujishima stared vacantly into the sky, as if he'd forgotten the answer to the question, then slowly started walking as though he'd abruptly came back to himself.

Flustered, Tohru started to follow. Fushima's back was hunched as he walked ahead, snow melting at the nape of his neck. Seeing how cold he looked, Tohru took out the scarf he'd stuffed into his daypack. He meant to place it on Fujishima nonchalantly, but he ended up touching that white nape. Fujishima yelped and flinched his shoulders, and the box he'd been carrying dropped to the ground with a thunk.

"S-sorry! I just wanted to lend you my scarf. Your neck looked cold, and... I wasn't playing a prank on you! I really am sorry."

Fujishima rubbed his neck and looked down. "...you don't have to apologize. I was just a little startled."

"I really am sorry."

"It's all right, already."

It hadn't been on purpose. However, Tohru worried that Fujishima's aloof attitude appeared angry, so he peeked at the downturned face. He was just thinking the face was red, when Fujishima noticed his

gaze and drew back as if frightened. The eyes looking up at him seemed on the verge of tears, as if he felt Tohru were being mean to him.

"...I don't deal well with being touched on the neck," he mumbled faintly. Was that really all it was? Tohru wanted to ask, but couldn't.

"Oh, that's right! Are the cakes okay?" Now that Tohru had mentioned it, Fujishima finally remembered the box he'd dropped. He picked it up, opened the lid a bit and peered inside. Abruptly, his face turned sober.

"They're a little knocked out of shape, but they should still taste the same."

It didn't seem they were in good condition. Tohru drew closer and tried to look in the box himself, and the man jumped in surprise. His face was stiff and he lightly bit his lip. The hands holding the cake box trembled.

"How come you're so tense?" The already red face turned scarlet. Suddenly, Tohru understood. "So he DOES like me!"

"Let's go home," Fujishima pleaded in a thin voice, and started walking on ahead. Tohru followed, pushing his bike. He wondered when had it started. Had Fujishima liked him from the start, before he'd lost his memory? What had his relationship with Fujishima been like? Could they really have been just friends? And even if they'd been lovers, that didn't seem out of place now.

His body itched with desire. He wanted to say he loved him, loved him very much. And he wanted to kiss those red cheeks, to hold that trembling body. When they got back... when they got back to the apartment, he'd tell

him. He'd say he loved him. Then he'd give Fujishima a kiss that would make him feel faint, and he'd get his fill of touching the real Fujishima, not a fantasy.

Fujishima halted. Tohru stopped as if he'd been caught on a hook, then noticed Fujishima had stopped because the traffic light was red. He lost sight of everything but Fujishima. Amid the gray bustle, only this man, seen from the back, stood out in vivid color.

"Tohru Takahisa." The light was just about to turn green. He turned to see who had called his name from behind and saw a woman standing there. She was two, maybe three years older than him, and in her long, black coat and black boots, she gave the impression she was entirely black. Her face was unfamiliar, but Tohru couldn't take his eyes from her, because she was glaring at him with fearsome features.

A shadow passed before his eyes. Fujishima stood front of him, separating him from the woman. He didn't even have time to wonder why before the woman struck Fujishima. Standing behind him, even Tohru felt the impact dully. Once she'd struck, the woman stepped back unsteadily, turned on her heel and immediately ran away.

"Who was..." She'd known his name. Tohru tilted his head, wondering just what was going on, when Fujishima fell to his knees before him as though he were crumbling. Tohru crouched slightly.

"Mr. Fujishima, what's wrong?" Fujishima didn't answer when he spoke. Cold looks showered down from all around the man as he sat curled up on his knees in front of the crosswalk. Tohru stepped aside



from the bike and got on his knees in front of Fujishima. "You not feeling well...?"

Something was dripping at Fujishima's feet, making a black puddle. "...what's that?"

The puddle spread rapidly. That's when he noticed the reddish-black substance flowing between Fujishima's fingers, which were pressed against his stomach. He had no idea what had happened. After all, Fujishima had said nothing...

"Eeee!" He heard a scream from somewhere behind him.

"Ambulance. Call an ambulance..." It wasn't he who said that. Tohru remained dumbfounded before the bloodsoaked man, unable to move. Gory fingers gripped Tohru's arm. Eyes narrowed in pain looked at him.

"...don't tell them I was stabbed. You absolutely musn't tell them. This was an accident." Now that it had finally been said, he realized the woman had stabbed Fujishima.

"But th-that woman..."

The shaken voice turned over. "I'm begging you, promise you won't tell."

Fujishima started a fit of coughing. There was no way Tohru could refuse the words that came from those trembling lips.

"All right. I won't tell. Better if I don't, right?"

Now that Tohru had promised, Fujishima's pale face smiled slightly. "If I die, everything of mine is yours." A shiver ran down Tohru's spine at how concretely he'd put it.

"What are you talking about? Of course you're

not gonna die!"

The substance flowing out of Fujishima was dripping down Tohru as well, warmly soaking his jeans. He became dizzy from the raw smell of blood. Shaking, he wondered what was going on, how this could have happened. Just as he was on the verge of tears, strength filled the right arm that was holding him. Fujishima had pressed his face to Tohru's chest like a spoiled child.

"The apartment, the money...they're yours. Use them to live however you please. Do what you want, be free..." His right arm, which was gripping Tohru so much that it hurt, suddenly lost its strength.

"Mr. Fujishima! Mr. Fujishima!"

Fujishima's body slumped down by his feet. His limbs trembled. Gritting his teeth to keep them from chattering, he lifted Fujishima in his arms. He stripped the man's upper body and pressed on his bloody stomach, but the blood wouldn't stop flowing out. It wouldn't stop...

"No... don't do this! Open your eyes! I said open your eyes, dammit!" The distant sound of an ambulance overlaid his yelling.

...the snow falling on the pale face slowly melted, and dripped down his cheeks like tears.

Tohru sat facing the middle-aged doctor in the dark waiting room of the emergency hospital where Fujishima had been taken.

"This is very difficult for me to say..." the doctor began, but he continued smoothly, without hesitating. "He's in a very critical state. He's suffered severe blood

loss and damage to his internal organs. You'd better prepare yourself."

"It seems you're his friend. Could I ask you to contact his family, please?" The doctor forced reality on Tohru, who was too stunned to speak. Fujishima's family. He'd never been strongly conscious of their existence until now, since they had nothing to do with him. He had no idea where Fujishima had been born or how he'd lived.

In the waiting room, Tohru opened Fujishima's commuter satchel, thinking there might be something inside indicating his family's phone number or address. However, the address lines in his notebook were blank. ...there was nothing written in it at all. Like Tohru, Fujishima didn't have his own cell phone, but he did have one provided by his company. He looked at it, thinking it might provide some clue, but the list of recorded numbers contained only about ten company names and the name of the hospital where Tohru had stayed. Not a single name recorded in it appeared to be a parent or friend.

Searching further through the satchel, he found a business card case. Written on the cards was "Tamasako Paper Manufacturing, Inc." along with the company's address and phone number. Tohru dialed the company on Fujishima's cell phone. Someone was still there. A middle-aged male voice answered the phone, and Tohru severely shocked him by reporting that Fujishima had been in an accident and was badly hurt. He asked for Fujishima's family's address, but man responded that he didn't know.

"He halfway joined the company about six months ago. He's serious, but real quiet. I never talked with him about anything except work."

Six months ago...Fujishima had changed jobs right about the time Tohru had had his accident.

"Please, just tell me anything about his family. Didn't he ever say anything? I need to contact them somehow."

The man on the other end of the line was silent for a while. "Come to think about, I do sort of recall him saying that he and his family didn't get along, but I don't know the details..."

The man at the company didn't know anything more than that. Tohru controlled his desperate need to be by Fujishima's side and went back to the apartment, though he kept an eye on the hospital. He turned the rooms inside out searching for something indicating Fujishima's family's address or phone number there was nothing—not a single postcard, photo or note. If Fujishima had been completely isolated from his family, there'd be nothing mysterious about him purposely eliminating all traces of them in his life.

Eventually, having found no clues, he returned to the hospital carrying only Fujishima's insurance card. As he pondered and pondered how to contact Fujishima's family, he started wondering if Fujishima would want him to call them. His relations with his parents and siblings had so soured that he was isolated from them. Did he really think Fujishima would want to see those people?

Fujishima might die, but even in that extreme

state, Tohru's egocentric thoughts didn't stop. Even if he didn't call the family with which Fujishima didn't get along, he himself would be enough; having Fujishima to himself would be all right. Having that awkward, unsociable man to himself would be all right.

The tears came flooding out. He pressed at the inner corners of his eyes. In the cold waiting room, the sobbing never ceased.

Despite having mercilessly threatened that Tohru prepare himself, the next day the doctor indifferently informed him that, "He's avoided the worst," though his severe expression never wavered. Tohru had been holding himself ready for anything, and now all the strength left his body. Now allowed visitors, Fujishima's pitiful form lay on the bed, oxygen tubes attached to his nose. Just seeing him that way made Tohru's heart ache, and he no longer wanted to enter the room. Until the nurse urged, "He's awake. Please, go closer to him," he didn't approach the bed. Though Fujishima was supposedly awake, his eyes didn't open even when Tohru stood next to him.

The color had drained from his pale face. The orange intravenous dripped regularly. Tohru was afraid to touch him, but he thought it might be all right if he just touched the fingertips poking slightly out from under the sheets. Softly, he extended his hand. He jumped—the fingers were surprisingly cold, just like a dead person's. He didn't like that, so he warmed them with his own.

Tohru spent nearly an hour sitting next to Fujishima before he opened his eyes, awakened by the

nurse calling out as she came to take his blood pressure.

"Do you know who I am?"

Only Fujishima's line of vision moved, and when their eyes met, he muttered, "...Tohru?" It was such a little thing, but having Fujishima say his name made him so happy, the tears just came pouring out. He had no room to think about the nurse being right next to him, or that he wasn't acting his age.

"Don't cry," Fujishima said hoarsely. "There's no need for you to cry." Having said that, he once again started drifting off to sleep. After the nurse had gone, Tohru softly kissed his fingernails. He was the sort of man you'd see anywhere. But there was only one Keishi Fujishima, only one of him in the whole world. Whoever or whatever lay ahead, whatever opportunities arose, it didn't matter. In Tohru's heart, he kept telling the sleeping man he loved him, loved him so much it amazed himself.

The first week after Fujishima had been hospitalized, Tohru was on his way back to the apartment with a change of clothes when he casually dropped in at the Port, where he found Mrs. Sakai busily working alone. She spotted him and asked, "How is your friend?" He replied that Fujishima's condition was better. "Oh, thank goodness," she smiled.

The day after the stabbing, Tohru had told her, "My friend's been badly hurt. I'd like to tend to him, since he has no relatives."

"Don't you mind about us," she'd said. "You go on to your friend." He'd accepted her offer and took

some time off, but as they spoke now, there was no break in the flow of customers, and he worried about how tired she looked.

Fujishima's condition had thoroughly stabilized, and he was scheduled to be moved from a private room to a two-person room tomorrow. He'd also started eating again, though it was only rice porridge so thin it was practically hot water. The hospital had comprehensive care, so Tohru really wasn't needed to tend to him. Even so, he'd stayed by Fujishima's side, as he couldn't calm down when he wasn't.

The day after Fujishima was transferred to a two-person room, Tohru returned to working at his job. In truth, he still wanted to stay by Fujishima all day long, but when he thought about the convalescing Mrs. Sakai possibly pushing herself too hard and having a relapse... he couldn't continue taking time off.

Tohru's days had fallen into a pattern of peeking in on Fujishima in the hospital and then going to work in the morning, then going straight to the hospital once work was over and staying by Fujishima until visiting hours were over. Tohru's greatest dread was 8:00 p.m., when visiting hours ended.

It was lonely going back to the apartment by himself, so he always pretended to forget when they were over. He would frequently tell Fujishima, "Well, I guess I'd better be going," then get moving only reluctantly.

Alone in the living room, he sometimes felt like crying as he remembered Fujishima being stabbed, telling Tohru he might die, and himself sitting in the

hospital waiting room. If Kusuda or someone else he knew was around and seemed to be free, he'd make small talk with them. This would distract him at least a little.

He wondered why he was having such lonely thoughts, and he realized that woman was behind it all. Fujishima had protected the woman, insisting that his stomach wound, which had clearly been made by a sharp object, had come when he "fell and jabbed myself with the point of the umbrella I was carrying." With the wounded party asserting that himself, it was true, then an otherwise newsworthy item was left unsettled and forgotten.

He had promised Fujishima, so he'd told no one, but day by day, his anger toward this strange woman grew. And one thing worried him: The woman had called his name first, but she'd stabbed Fujishima. Fujishima, who'd stepped in between him and the woman to separate them. Could it be that he himself had been her target?

But if she had been aiming at him, he was sure Fujishima would have told the police, since she wouldn't have achieved her goal of wounding Tohru yet, and would likely try again. Yet Fujishima hadn't mentioned her. That meant she likely was going after Fujishima after all.

It meant the one thing he could say for sure was that at least Fujishima knew that woman.

Tohru came into the hospital room, bringing along a cake for the first time in a while. Yesterday, Fujishima had finally gone back to eating normal food

instead of just rice porridge, and Tohru was sure that "normal food" meant it was okay for him he to send in a cake or two. As expected, Fujishima's face lit up as soon as he saw the cake box. Tohru had first gone to the apartment from work and taken the trouble to brew some coffee, put it into an insulated canteen, and brought that into the hospital room. He remembered all too shudderingly from his own hospitalization how awful hospital vending machine coffee was. Cake and coffee. The cramped hospital room now felt like their living room at home.

Enraptured, Fujishima ate his strawberry shortcake, his expression looking as if he would melt like cream. Watching that face, Tohru was so happy he couldn't stand it.

He thought people became fools the instant they became aware of their love. Disgusting fools. He was so engrossed, though, he didn't care about that. He was just happy to be with the man, to make HIM happy. Just a little smile from Fujishima made him feel he could ascend to Heaven. And so Tohru thought the way the majority of fools in love do: "How can I make him happier? How can I get him to smile?" As though he were watching a movie of which he didn't want to miss a scene, he burned the other man's expressions, actions, and words into his brain. He also searched desperately for any fragments of goodwill towards himself. Perhaps his gaze was too candid, as sometimes when he was next to Fujishima, the man would lower his head, looking uncomfortable.

"I did the decorations for this cake."

Fujishima stopped the hand bringing food to his mouth and took a fresh look at the cake on its plate. "Is that so? They're wonderful."

"Of course, the only decoration here is the ornamenting around the strawberry. March will be over soon. Then we'll be in strawberry season for real. The old man's on fire to create some new cake that uses strawberries, and that almost never happens. That's our test product. Tell me what you think when you're done."

"Understood," Fujishima smiled, and he picked up the strawberry and ate that first. Watching how he slowly bit down on food, somehow Tohru couldn't calm down. His groin tingled when Fujishima licked his foodstained fingers.

Even when he shifted his gaze away from the man's mouth to look at his chest, it was still the same. He didn't consider Fujishima a slender man, but his neck seemed conspicuously pale and thin in those hospital pajamas, which made it feel awfully sexy.

Fujishima didn't know he was raped nightly by the man before him. He didn't know how his legs were lewdly spread apart, how he was penetrated, how he was made to gasp so hard he screamed. The fantasy Fujishima was obedient for all his bashfulness, tempting Tohru by posing as he was told. He would willingly put himself in embarrassing positions, too.... Tohru caught his breath. He wanted to make night and day distinct, but there was no way to stop the fantasy thrusting itself into the crevice between them.

"Mr. Fujishima, what did you do when you were

in high school?" If Fujishima were silent, his imagination would run wild. He listened with feigned casualness.

"You mean like clubs?"

"Yeah."

"I went to a cram school, so I wasn't in any," Fujishima responded as he ate the cake with great relish.

"Hmm...well, what about middle school?"

"Gardening club."

"You like plants?"

Fujishima smiled wryly. "I chose it because it wasn't really active, since cram school kept me so busy." The fork came to a halt. "Now I wish I'd done more. ...why are you asking me about the past?"

"Um, well, somehow, I just..."

"Hearing about me must be dull," he said indifferently. But Tohru wanted to know about Fujishima, even if it was the most trivial things. He wanted to know because he loved him. He was interested because he loved him. However, being told the subject was dull, it became difficult for Tohru to ask questions, and he shut his mouth.

When the man was done eating his cake, he gave his honest impressions of it—the sponge cake was delicious, and the cream was a little sweet—but Tohru hardly listened. He was unsure about bringing up a certain subject.

"Hey, could I ask you one more thing?"

"What?"

"Did you know that woman?" Fujishima tilted his head. "The woman who stabbed you."

Instantly, the other man's expression hardened.
 "...I don't want to talk about it."

"How did she know my name?" Fujishima said nothing.

"Why did you protect her even though she hurt you so badly?" Fujishima's thin lips remained as tightly shut as a clamshell.

"Maybe you don't remember, but you were close to death, right?"

The man remained silent with his gaze averted, and Tohru gradually became irritated. He didn't know why Fujishima wouldn't say anything. He wanted to expose her and get revenge for how she'd hurt Fujishima. He would not rest until she met an equal or worse fate. Violent thoughts piled up in the pit of his stomach. Fujishima might not mind, but he could not forgive her.

He could not forgive the woman who tried to make him alone.

"Why won't you go to the police?"

"It's not necessary."

"Not necessary? You mean it'd be all right if you'd died?"

"I figured if it happened, there was nothing I could do about it."

That's how he'd been when he was stabbed, too. Fujishima had said he was giving Tohru his apartment and money, as if he were making out a will, and then passed out. Just remembering that moment, Tohru felt a shiver run down his spine. As he'd waited for the surgery to end, he'd spent the time in the waiting room crying

like a little child, and he never wanted to think about that again.

"Well, what do I do if she shows up? Let myself be stabbed like a good boy? And for that matter... was she actually after me? The first thing she did was call out my name."

Fujishima didn't move a muscle, but remained firm with his head down. "This is between me and her. You don't need to know about it."

That hard voice. Tohru kicked loudly at the chair leg, and Fujishima's head lifted in surprise. Tohru was angry about him protecting the woman and not letting Tohru enter in on what was going on between them.

"Fine, then I have no right to be worried! I just have no idea what you're thinking, Mr. Fujishima, no idea at all!"

"Don't raise your voice."

He was furious at being scolded. Tohru closed up the folding chair on which he'd been sitting and violently set it against the wall. "The only one raising a fuss in this room is you, Mr. Fujishima. Enough, already—I'm going home. I'll just be noisy and depressing if I stay here, right?"

Having spat this out, he flew out of the hospital room. He ran down the stairs, his head overflowing with rage. Why was it necessary to protect someone who'd done something wrong? People who did something wrong should receive punishment. He unlocked his mountain bike from where he'd parked it in the hospital's bicycle rack. As he started to pedal, he forgot about the drop in pavement level and went for a spectacular fall.

His helmet, which he hadn't strapped on, went rolling into the road ahead of him. "Damnit!" he spat, and kicked the bike's tire.

He sat down and hugged his knees. He was mad, he was mad, he was mad... yet he felt like crying. As he continued to sit there, a chill pushed its way up from his gut, and he shuddered violently. He lifted his head and saw something white fluttering down. It was snow as fine as the powdered sugar the old man used. It was almost April, yet the weather hadn't warmed up at all. The cold just went on and on. Tohru held back, but the tears came dripping out. He resented the man who wouldn't understand how worried he was, how lonely he was. He should have hated him. He shouldn't have loved him. Then he wouldn't have been hurt when he was spoken to like that.

Tohru picked up his bike and started to pedal, purposely not wearing his helmet. He kept thinking and thinking about Fujishima, and on the way home he stopped the bike. He then tore back to the hospital at ferocious speed. At the bicycle rack, he locked up his mountain bike once again.

He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep if he went home like this. He'd say he came back because he'd forgotten his canteen—that would do. He'd just see Fujishima's face one more time and then go home... such were his thoughts as he went back into the hospital.

Going in made him uneasy because of the venom he'd spewed before taking off. He stood for a while outside the hospital room, but became worried

about the stares he was getting from all around. The nurses and other people going by looked at him with eyes that said, "What the heck are you doing?"

Gathering his courage, he entered the room, but Fujishima wasn't there. Even though Tohru had wanted to see his face before going home, he was a little relieved at his absence. Thinking Fujishima might be washing his hands, Tohru waited for him to return, but some time passed and he did not. Unable to keep waiting, Tohru peeked into the toilet, but there was no sign of anyone there. Fujishima couldn't be out for an examination—it was evening. He wandered the halls until he ran into the middle-aged nurse who was in charge of Fujishima.

"Excuse me, Mr. Fujishima isn't in his room..."

The nurse tilted her head and said, "Oh, that's right. Someone came to meet him a little while ago, so he might be in the lounge."

As far as Tohru knew, the only person besides himself who'd come to see Mr. Fujishima was a man in a suit who said he was a representative from Fujishima's workplace.

"I've seen her here often, so she may be his sweetheart."

Tohru's whole body stiffened at being told this so glibly. "She comes here often, you say?"

"She's been coming in the afternoons for about a week now, I think. Very pretty person."

His heart throbbed painfully. Fujishima had said he didn't have a lover.

But he'd also said there was someone he loved. Tohru had thought it could only be him, but was it



possible he loved someone else? Could it be there was someone else in Fujishima's heart besides him?

Tohru staggered toward the lounge at the left end of the ward. Dinner was over, so there was no one inside—apart from two people he could see from behind, sitting in chairs next to each other in the middle of the room.... Silencing his footsteps, he drew closer. One of the backs of those two heads was definitely Fujishima's, and the other had long hair. Every time the woman shook her head, the hair hanging down her back swung side to side. Unable to speak up, Tohru still wondered what they were saying, so he crouched down under a decorative plant behind the chairs. He strained to hear their conversation, never considering there might be something wrong with eavesdropping.

"You don't have to come by any more." That was Fujishima's voice. "As you can see, I'm all better..."

The woman remained silent.

"No matter what happened to me, I would never have blamed you. If you wish, if you tell me to die, I would jump out that window right now and it wouldn't matter."

Tohru felt a shudder along his spine at Fujishima's indifferent tone, because it didn't sound like he was joking. The woman's sobbing echoed softly.

"Please, stop..."

"You know that's all there is to it."

This didn't have the atmosphere of a lovers' chat. All that was coming through was a sense of tension so strong it stung. The woman's body shuddered heavily.

"Why are you protecting Tohru Takahisa so

much? He's just an acquaintance, isn't he?"

Tohru was stunned to hear his name mentioned.

"I thought we'd discussed this before, but Tohru lost his memory. He doesn't remember the accident or anything before it. Demanding that he regret what he doesn't remember, that he atone for his crime, would be cruel, wouldn't it?"

How could this be? Why was the conversation developing to center around him? What he couldn't remember... a crime... all he'd done was cause a one-person accident. Suddenly, the words of his former co-worker Ishii went through the back of his mind.

"So just because he's forgotten, because he's lost his memory, I should forgive the fact that he killed my little brother when he smashed into his car, which was running in the opposite lane?"

Tohru's fingers went pale. The accident, the culprit, the victim... he couldn't remember anything. Not a thing. What had he done...?

"I don't think such a thing could be forgiven, which is why I'll take the blame in his place. I'll do anything. So please, just leave Tohru be."

The woman laughed. "It was such a big accident, and my brother died, yet there was no report, so there was no trial. How much did that cost you? How much did you pay to to save that man by having my brother's case hushed up?"

"I'm sorry..."

"And then after the accident, you were able to conceal your whereabouts so neatly... if his former co-worker hadn't known his new contact information, I'm

sure I'd never have found you. Were you relieved you'd managed to escape? Did you think you could start a new life? Don't make me laugh! My little brother's dead! He died a wasted death, and that's all there is to it! No matter how much apology money you send me, nothing will change that. Give me back my little brother! Give him back! If you can't do that, then make that man get down on his knees in front of me!"

She was practically screaming, and her voice tore apart his heart. Tohru stared at his hands, which were trembling.

"I am all too aware that money will not settle matters like this, but I could think of no other way to apologize. Tohru's financial assets... weren't that much, but I had them all sent to you. I don't believe this will get you to forgive him, but please... please, I beg you to do so."

Fujishima bowed deeply. The silence continued, with the woman sobbing softly.

"So you'd scare me off by using yourself as a shield? You're hoping I'll agree we're even because I stabbed you and you nearly died, is that it?"

"No, that's not it..." Fujishima closed his mouth a bit. "As far as I can see, Tohru has not had a fortunate life. It would be cruel to watch him suffer for a crime he doesn't remember on top of all that. I felt his life had been reset when he lost his memory. This time, I want to give him a happy life, not chained down by anything. I know I'm in no position to hope for such a thing, and that he must make up for his crime. However, I simply wanted him to be happy, even if it meant committing

that taboo."

The woman's sobs echoed all around.

"I accept all blame for his crime. So please, try to forget about the man named Tohru Takahisa."

"Even if you bear the blame, it won't bring my little brother back..."

Tohru crept out of the lounge as the woman continued to cry. His head was overflowing with this flood of facts; he was drowning in the turbid waters. ...he was getting dizzy. He walked unsteadily down the hall, and on his way down the stairs, he fell and tumbled all the way down to the next landing. There was a tremendous noise, and he grew faint. For an instant, he wondered if he was dead, but a sharp pain pulled him back to reality.

His legs were still unsteady, so he slowly descended the stairs by moving along the wall. Snow was still falling when he got outside. At the bicycle rack, when he put his hand on his cold mountain bike, something flooded through him like a dam had burst. Tohru raised his voice and wailed. He didn't know if they were tears of mourning for someone whose face he didn't remember or of regret for himself being unable to remember anything.

His breath froze and his fingers were numb with cold. Even so, the tears wouldn't stop as he sobbed through his nose. He raised his head, only to see a silhouette leaving from the hospital's entryway. A black coat. Traces of long hair. Half-unconsciously, he began following the retreating form. He caught the woman's arm, and she spun around in surprise.

"I'm sorry..." Tohru knelt at her feet. "I'm so sorry. Please, forgive me..."

His tears rolled down in huge drops for the accident he couldn't remember, for his killing a man whose face he didn't even know. His hands had destroyed. His hands had killed.

The woman didn't budge, but stood her ground firmly as a temple guardian statue.

"Look up at me." Her sharp voice pierced through his ears. Tohru raised his tear-streaked face, but his rapidly overflowing tears made the woman's face look vaguely distorted.

"You're Tohru Takahisa, aren't you." She spoke his name slowly, as if confirming it. Tohru nodded so much he trembled.

"I h...heard you two t...talking just now. I didn't know... I didn't know..." He realized whatever he said would be an excuse.

"You killed him. My little brother will never smile or cry again."

Tohru sobbed loudly.

"Your carelessness took away a life that might have gone on for decades. My parents and I will have to live the rest of our lives without my little brother!"

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.... I'll do anything. I'll do anything if you would just forgive me. I... I..."

He was sure he could never atone for it, no matter what he did. Even so, he bowed his head to the ground so that he might convey his feelings, at least a little. The woman's right leg kicked the ground in exasperation.

"You're saying the same things he did. 'Do whatever you want. You can even kill me...' Do you think my family wanted to have either of you do anything?"

She commanded him sternly to raise his head, and he slowly did so. She glared at him harshly and slapped him on the cheek with her right hand. She continued to slap him right and left, until her strength ran out, then collapsed to the ground and grasped it tightly.

"My little brother had a police record for assault. We didn't deal with it in his teens, and he was taken into juvenile custody many times. He finally settled down, though. He had just told us he was going to buckle down, be serious and follow the family's footsteps when the accident happened."

The woman's hands shook. "When I was attending the wake, I had to suffer backbiting gossip saying, 'He was a bad boy; he got what he deserved.' Do you have any idea how that made me feel?"

Tohru only continued to repeat, "I'm sorry."

"That's right, it's your fault!" the woman countered, and struck at his head until she apparently tired of it and fell quiet.

"At the time of the accident, you went over the center line and crashed into my brother's car. Even if it was because you'd dozed off, the fact is you killed him." She casually stood up. "Never forget... never forget you killed someone... remember it your whole life..." Her words fell straight on his head.

"Please tell the man who protected you that I'm sorry and to please forgive me." Her footsteps became distant and then faded away. Tohru remained crouched

on the ground, unable to move for some time.

The lights had long since been put out. He went past the nurses' station, but the nurses, absorbed in conversation, didn't notice the after-hours visitor.

There was only one bed being used in Fujishima's two-bed room. The elderly man who'd been next to him had been released yesterday. He carefully opened the door to see that the cream-colored curtains had been pulled around Fujishima's bed. Light shone faintly through the soft cloth. It was 10:00 p.m., still a little early to be asleep, so Fujishima might be reading a book.

"Mr. Fujishima..." he called from outside the light. There was a sound of rubbing cloth.

"Takahisa? What's wrong?"

Tohru went past the curtain. Fujishima was sitting upright in bed. He placed the magazine he was holding over his knee. "I thought visiting hours were over..."

He was being reprimanded for not following regulations. It wasn't a big deal, yet he felt like crying. "I'm sorry, I'll go right home. I just wanted to apologize..."

"Apologize?"

"For those rude things I said earlier."

"You came all the way back here just for that? You could have done it tomorrow."

Tohru could offer no excuse. Coming here at such a late hour was purely for his own convenience. As he hung his head, Fujishima asked, "Is it raining?"

"Not rain. It's snowing. Why?"

"Your hair looked wet..."

"That's because I was outside for a while."

Tohru sniffled loudly.

"What were you doing outside?"

Unable to answer, Tohru sat by the foot of the bed with his back to Fujishima. He didn't want Fujishima to see his face, which looked so disgraceful from being slapped and crying so much. His jeans were blackish from the knees down, though not with dirt nor water, and his hands were filthy from crouching on the ground so long. His coat was soaked with snow too, and when he hung his head, water dripped from his forelocks.

In the snow, he had considered things he couldn't remember even if he thought about them. The meaning of what he had done, of his crime... and of Fujishima hiding it. Fujishima's behavior in trying to protect him certainly wasn't right. Even if he didn't know anything about his crime, he still had to pay for it. He had done it, even if he didn't remember it. But Fujishima had tried to protect him with the balance scales within himself. Why had he gone that far? Tohru couldn't believe that his life meant that much. Even his current self... was nothing much.

That woman might forgive him, but she might also come again to remind him of what he'd done...

What he had to do was atone for his sin, and he had to do it now. He didn't know how, but he would atone with all his might. Even so, he thought of other things. His selfish heart thought of the other man. Of his true motives for protecting Tohru so much. Of his feelings.

"Look at me." Hanging his head like a child scolded by his teacher, Tohru turned to face Fujishima.

"...you didn't want to be alone."

Even so, the pain in Tohru's heart didn't ease up because he was next to him. Now that he knew the truth, he had to tell Fujishima. He had to tell him he no longer had to surround Tohru with lies to protect him. He knew he had to face that.

But if Tohru started preparing to battle the truth, if there was no need to surround him with lies, what would Fujishima do? Would he abandon what he no longer needed to protect?

As he looked at the white hand placed on the sheets, he automatically grasped its wrist. It trembled in fear, it pulled away as if trying to escape, but he would not let go. Gradually, the hand he held quieted down and finally stopped moving.

His heart skipped a beat at the sensation of being touched. Fujishima was softly rubbing Tohru's hand in return as it held Fujishima's wrist.

"What have you been doing that your hands are so cold?"

Abruptly, Tohru wanted this man. He wanted this awkward man. He never wanted to lose those gentle hands. Tohru put his knees on the bed and bent over as he drew closer to Fujishima. The man shrank back in surprise, but that was all he could do on the narrow bed.

"Why are you trying to get away?"

"I'm not trying to get away."

When Tohru brought his face closer, it clearly caused Fujishima's cheeks to stiffen.

"You're on my side, aren't you Mr. Fujishima?"

"That's an odd way of putting it. I don't know if it's right to classify someone like that as on your side or whatever."

Tohru drew closer and kissed him. It was just a brushing kiss, but Fujishima's eyes went wide open. Tohru held the second kiss a little longer. After he drew back, the lips before him trembled as though chilled.

Fujishima covered his mouth with one hand.

His eyes were bewildered, but he didn't ask why Tohru had kissed him. He slowly lowered his head and murmured in a trembling voice, "Go home now."

He repeated the request: "Go back to the apartment."

He had sympathized with Tohru for being pitiful and unhappy, and yet Tohru saw Fujishima as the miserable one. He could not say what he thought.

He could not speak his feelings. Even with Tohru appealing to his favor as he had, Fujishima could say nothing. Tohru suspected Fujishima's reason and morals were what he couldn't voice.

"You love me, don't you, Mr. Fujishima," Tohru whispered in his ear, and Fujishima's head raised in surprise. "You love me enough to consider risking your life for me. Enough to keep me in your home after I lost my memory."

"It's not as if I KEPT you there..." His clenched fingers trembled. "I just wanted you to be happy."

Tohru embraced the slender body with its pale back and sweet-smelling neck. Fujishima shook severely.



"What was I to you before I lost my memory, Mr. Fujishima?"

Fujishima did not say, "a friend" as he usually did, so Tohru figured that must have been a lie.

"Were we lovers?"

"It wasn't like that." His voice was thin, barely audible.

"And here I was hoping it was. If it was true, it wouldn't be necessary for me to attach a reason to each of my feelings. I could believe that my love for you was hidden unconsciously in my memories."

Fujishima lowered his head and shook it side to side. "You hated me. That's why..."

"Then I'm glad."

The lowered face looked up.

"I'm glad I lost my memory. I'm glad I forgot all about the me that hated you, Mr. Fujishima."

Fujishima looked pained. "...you're a fool."

"So I'm a fool. Just let me hear your feelings, Mr. Fujishima. Tell me straight out."

Tohru whispered, "I love you" into his ears several times. He shook off Fujishima's frail restraining protests, crowded onto the bed, dirty shoes and all, and embraced him tightly.

Tohru kissed him again and again, growing more excited as he did so, then pressed his face against Fujishima's chest. His love for Fujishima, his desire to help him, his loneliness... all these mixed together into one and flowed out of his tear ducts.

Even as he shook, Fujishima embraced Tohru's head, and the words he breathed out were so simple they

made one wonder why he'd shut his mouth on them so stubbornly. "I love you," he said. That was all.

When quiet tears returned to his emotions, Tohru finally looked around him with a level head. The sheets were filthy, covered in his sneakerprints. Not only was the front of Fujishima's pajamas sodden, there were pale gray stains here and there on them where Tohru had touched them with his dirty hands. Fujishima plucked at the buttoned front of his pajamas, which were disgustingly soaked with tears and mucus, and shuddered.

"I'm sorry. I..."

"Don't worry, I'll have you bring a change of clothes."

Through the undone front, Tohru could see his white chest and pale nipples. He remembered a strange sensation from that area, which he'd been monopolizing so utterly until a moment ago. Without thinking, he reached out and slid his hands into the opening, and Fujishima's body stiffened in fright.

"Take your hand away."

"I just want to touch it a little."

Working both his hands in, he bared Fujishima's chest. It had no soft undulations, but even the small, perfunctory protrusions on the flat chest made his lower body throb furiously. He inserted his fingers in from under Fujishima's arms and gently pressed down on the soft projections with his thumbs. They grew a little harder and warmer than he'd expected.

"S....stop that."

"No, I don't want to..."

Tohru once again pressed his face against the bared chest. He took one of the little grains into his mouth. It was hard and hot. He hadn't expected any flavor, but it tasted sweet. Sensing that Fujishima was moving his hips to get away, he hurriedly drew closer. As he sucked up hard, Fujishima leaked out a long, gasping breath.

"N-no, don't, don't..."

Ignoring the voice, Tohru continued. He used his teeth, rolled with his tongue, and sucked. As he sucked, he searched out Fujishima's lower body. He wanted to be sure if all this was of no use or not. Fujishima's body stiffened as Tohru touched him over his briefs. Tohru got excited too as Fujishima's body honestly indicated its pleasure. Following his impulsive desire to see, he hooked a hand on the briefs and pulled them down.

"P-please, stop!"

At the same time Fujishima screamed, they heard the door opening. Tohru thrust himself away, and Fujishima hurriedly grasped together the front of his pajamas and pulled up his briefs.

"Mr. Fujishima?"

They heard the nurse's voice and approaching footsteps. The curtain trembled, and Fujishima called out in panic, "Don't open it!" The shaking of the cloth came to an unnatural halt. "I was having a nightmare. I don't want you to see how disgraceful I look..."

"Are you all right? You don't feel sick?"

"No, I'm fine. Sorry I raised my voice like that."

The footsteps grew distant, and the door shut. After they'd both breathed sighs of relief, they found a rather uncomfortable air had settled around them. Tohru wanted to touch Fujishima so badly he couldn't stand it, but he forced himself to draw back and sat on the bed, hugging his knees, while Fujishima told him, "Don't."

Tohru reflected on his going into heat without regard to time or place. Even so, when he put out his hand, wanting to draw closer, Fujishima stared at the hand just as if it were something scary.

"D-Don't."

"Just your hand, then. I'll just hold it..." he said.

"I won't do anything," he added, "Just give me your hand. Please."

Fujishima stared at Tohru's right hand, and after a long, long pause, so long Tohru grew faint, he finally put his own right hand gently on top of Tohru's.

At dawn, they were scolded by the nurse, who found them both lying sound asleep on Fujishima's bed when it came time to take his morning temperature.

Tohru and Fujishima both apologized repeatedly to the fuming nurse.

Even as Tohru got scolded, he was happy. They'd held hands all night long. He knew that during the night, Fujishima had put his blanket over him while Tohru had been asleep and let Tohru put his cold fingers in under the cloth. He even knew how Fujishima had softly breathed on his ear when he thought Tohru wouldn't notice. There was no mistake—Fujishima's hands would always protect him. He was desperately

trying to protect Tohru even now.

Two days after he'd prostrated himself and apologized to the woman, Tohru took time off from work to go to the police station. However much Fujishima might protect him, he believed he had to pay for the crime he'd committed. The first thing he said at the police station where he used to live was, "I'd like to report an accident that happened half a year ago." He'd insisted that he was at fault in the accident, but the reaction of the policeman in the window was terribly ambiguous. On top of that, when asked how he was at fault, he couldn't clearly reply. While he'd been involved, he couldn't remember a thing about the circumstances of the accident. Ultimately, he made no progress at all.

In the end, he was told, "Just what do you want to tell us? If we knew, I believe the police would be able to treat the matter suitably..." and he had to go home, still unable to do anything. However, the accident would always remain in a corner of his mind. Formal reports of car accidents on the news stabbed through his heart. Every time, he'd remember the woman telling him, "Never forget."

Tohru didn't know what would happen to him, but he started a savings account. He had not been judged by law, so maybe it would gain him some self-satisfaction. And yet... he felt that as long as he conveyed back at least a little of his feelings in some form, no matter what it was, that would do...

The cherry buds swelled, and he was just thinking how prettily they'd bloomed when before

he knew it, only the dark leaves remained. Sales on the old man's strawberry-intensive cake were doing all right, and they'd had a lot of repeat customers recently. Tohru diligently turned to business, sending in a few cakes on the sly to the nurses and such.

When work was over, he pedaled off in his T-shirt and jeans at full speed on his bike. It was 6:30 p.m. Fujishima was finishing dinner at the hospital, and Tohru was bringing him his "sneaked-in" cake. He knocked on the door to the hospital room and said, "Sorry to keep you waiting. Today's menu is cheesecake and gateau aux fraises."

Fujishima stared like a child as Tohru took the cakes out of their box and put them on plates. He looked so cute like that, Tohru automatically wanted to hug him. He wanted to touch him, even just the front of his hair, but he clenched his hands and frantically restrained himself. When he did such things, even in play, Fujishima would suddenly blush and drop his gaze.

Once he'd gone into his shell, Tohru couldn't talk with him about anything.

He put the cakes on a plate, topped them off with a fork, and presented them to Fujishima, who thanked him. Normally, Fujishima would start eating instantly, but today he just sat there with the plate in his hands, staring at it.

"...they've decided to release me," fell from the lips he wanted to kiss as he watched them. "They say I could go home next week."

"Really? I'll have to buy you a WHOLE cake

to celebrate."

"I could never eat that much," Fujishima muttered with an embarrassed smile.

Fin

Class Reunion

As he walked through the shopping district, a cold wind fitfully blew across his cheeks. It was the middle of February and the temperatures were reaching some of the coldest of the year. Every night the TV repeated the same phrase, "the temperature has dropped below freezing".

Though his breath made a white cloud in the air and his fingertips were numb, he barely felt the cold. He was walking in a group of people, and all of them had had more than a few drinks already.

Wearing a thick black sweater and a khaki nylon windbreaker over jeans, Masayuki Taniguchi was dressed casually and unobtrusively. Most of the women had on business suits and stylish dresses, but the men were in a mix of business suits and casual wear, just like himself. The only thing that didn't match were the shoes- he'd been with his crew earlier in the day to cover a story, and while he wasn't fond of getting his Nikes muddy during a night on the town, there was nothing he could have done about it. Brown leather shoes wouldn't have matched, and as he'd left his apartment immediately after returning home from work, he hadn't had time to search for the black shoes he had in the closet.

"We're here!" shouted the host, as everyone piled through the doors of a small bar. They all found seats and discovered that the number of people in the

group had dwindled to about a fourth of the night's earlier numbers.

Like a leaf on a current, Masayuki had happily drifted along from the first party all the way to this, the fourth after-party. He didn't have to go to work the next day, and he had no wife or kids to rush home to. The picture of the free and easy bachelor life. Masayuki looked around at the former classmates surrounding him. Just before hitting their thirties, usually right at the age of twenty-nine, most of them would be married. An old friend talked as if it were a hassle, taking care of three kids, but he was unable to hide his grin. From Masayuki's perspective, as someone who was used to gulping down his evening nightcap alone, this made his friend look almost like a stranger.

He excused himself from the rest of the group and went to the restroom. After doing his business, he spotted a round table nearby with people being boisterous compared to the calm vibe in the rest of the bar. One person belted out a song, while another grabbed the person next to them and talked away. They may have looked like they were too old to be partying, but maybe in their hearts, they felt like they were back in high school.

He realized he'd had too much to drink, so he sat down at the counter in the hopes of sobering up.

"What would you like" asked the bartender, a graying older man with the charm of a foreign film star.

Masayuki tried to show restraint and ordered an oolong tea. Despite his absence, the party went on as though they didn't even notice, but suddenly his eyes

met another's. It was Yuichi Kurokawa. During the first part of the party, he'd spent his time standing by the wall the whole time. At first, Masayuki had thought he'd never seen the tall man before, but he was wrong; it was Kurokawa. He was dressed in a black suit and a crisp white shirt. If not for his patterned tie, he would have looked like he'd just come from a funeral.

Masayuki took a sip of his oolong tea, looked up and their eyes met again. Just then, the man who'd been staring at him the whole time came down the aisle from the seats in front of the counter. Masayuki thought he might have something to tell him, but Kurokawa just lightly nodded as he passed by, then disappeared into the back of the bar. Masayuki realized he probably just needed to use the restroom.

The oolong tea was down to about half the glass when Kurokawa passed by Masayuki's side. After about a foot or two, he suddenly stopped and turned around.

"Aren't you going to go back in there?" he asked.

"I'm a bit drunk," replied Masayuki, "I'm not very pleasant to be around when I'm drunk, so I evacuated before I could make a fool of myself."

He grinned, which seemed to make Kurokawa smile back.

"That's true, it does seem a bit too noisy in there."

Kurokawa awkwardly took a seat on the high bar stool at the counter. Sitting, he blocked Masayuki's view of the crowd.

He'd wanted to spend some quiet time alone

with his thoughts, but he couldn't tell the man next to him to just go back to where he came from. Fortunately, Kurokawa didn't seem inclined to want to speak to Masayuki anyway. Thank goodness he wasn't much of a talker, he thought as he sipped his oolong tea. Looking at the dusty shapes of the liquor bottles behind the counter, he suddenly felt like going somewhere. Somewhere far away, preferably. Maybe even overseas. If so, Alaska would be perfect at the end of summer, during the short autumn season. If only some publisher could provide travel expenses for part of covering a story... but it would be impossible, he thought and let out a sigh.

The bartender noticed his now-empty glass and asked him what he'd like next. Newly sober, everything seemed boring, so he ordered a beer. He glanced over to the man next to him and their eyes met again. He felt he should say something so as to not seem rude.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing to the man's hand.

"A martini."

Sure enough, there was an olive left in the bottom of the empty cocktail glass.

"I haven't seen you in a while. Where do you live now, Taniguchi?" said Kurokawa in a small voice, that didn't at all fit with his slim but tall body.

"In Ichida."

"Ichida, oh, I see."

With that, Kurokawa ordered a salty dog from the bartender. And then there was silence. Presently, the cocktail was finished and presented to Kurokawa. He lifted the glass with both hands, as though he were

carefully cradling it, and delicately licked the salt from the rim. Masayuki was reminded of a cat drinking water. And also, as though he'd seen something like this before, back when he was in school. He'd thought then it looked like something a poor man would do, and he smiled wryly to think that Kurokawa hadn't changed a bit in almost ten years.

"Kurokawa, you stayed in your hometown of Kineshiro, right? You're in public services?" He really had no interest in knowing, but asked out of politeness. He couldn't remember if it was at the first party or one of the many after-parties, but he'd caught that much. He remembered it only because the job matched his impression of Kurokawa from high school exactly.

Kurokawa had been the textbook definition of an honor student. He wasn't a prodigy, but whatever effort he put into academics was rewarded. If he had just been a diligent and serious honor student, Kurokawa wouldn't have been hated so much. Bad with words and completely introverted, he was always sensitive around others and was a complete coward. Because of these traits, there were rumors that he'd been badly bullied in middle school. After entering high school, maybe because everyone had moved on from their sensitive phase, there wasn't any really notable bullying and no one seemed to care about their gloomy classmate. But due to Kurokawa's experiences during middle school, he'd learned a way to protect himself and used it as his secret weapon, even during high school. If he found anyone who was trying to harm him in the slightest bit,

he would find even the tiniest mistake they'd made and tattle to the teacher immediately. There were many who called him the teacher's dog. Kurokawa claimed it was completely fair, but to the students around him, it was a complete pain. Just for saying something bad behind his back, he'd glare at you with hatred and tell on your most minor violation of any school rule.

Soon enough, everyone decided to let sleeping dogs lie. No one went near Kurokawa. He would never be hurt, but at the same time, he would be completely ignored or hated by his fellow classmates. There was no way he could have ever made any friends.

Despite being tall, he always slouched and hunched over, so he looked wimpy. His face was fairly good-looking, so there were a few girls who tried to ask him out. There were times when he was seen walking home with a girl, but it never lasted very long. One time, Masayuki just happened to overhear a conversation that Kurokawa's ex-girlfriend had with her friend;

"Once he opened his mouth, all he ever talked about was audio equipment! 'That maker's amp isn't all that great', or stuff I just didn't even understand! At first, I listened and nodded, but towards the end, I just couldn't take it anymore, so I made a face like I was totally disgusted. Get this- then he looked like he was about to cry! I told him 'enough is enough!' and then he really did start crying! I got goosebumps it was so disgusting!"

Masayuki had secretly had a crush on the girl who'd been telling her story with dramatic gestures. When he'd found out she'd dated Kurokawa, he was disappointed and jealous all at the same time. He

remembered being extremely frustrated because he hadn't wanted to be jealous of someone like Kurokawa.

"A public servant right in my home town. I hate it because I already know everyone." Kurokawa stopped licking the salt from the rim of the glass and chugged the salty dog. Now grown up, he still retained the look of the outcast he'd once been. Although his expressions, voice and demeanor were now those of an adult.

Masayuki shrugged and laughed, "Well, I can't do anything about it."

"I envy you, Taniguchi. You're a photographer, right?"

Being directly called a photographer made him wave both of his hands in a flurry.

"It's not that great, I just barely make enough to make ends meet. To have a book of my own work is like a dream of a dream at this point."

"I've seen one of your photos before," Kurokawa squinted happily.

"I haven't done any work recently that would have had my name on it."

Kurokawa seemed confident about his statement, he insisted he wasn't lying.

"It was two or three years ago. You took the cover photo for a women's weekly magazine."

Masayuki thought for a little bit, convinced by Kurokawa's certainty.

"Come to think of it, I did do a job like that. But how did you know it was me?"

"In the colophon, the name of the photographer

is listed. I was really happy to find out it was a classmate from high school and I was really proud. I'm so envious of you. You get to make a living doing what you like."

"...yeah..."

Whenever people found out he took photos for a living, they reacted the same way Kurokawa did.

"That's so great that you found a job that you like!"

"You made your dream come true!"

"When's a collection coming out?"

While it was true that it was a job he liked, and you could say he'd made his dream come true after a fashion, fantasy and reality are two different things. Even if one takes photos for a living, only a handful of photographers get their big break and release a collection. It's the same as with aspiring actors; only a handful will ever make it into the spotlight.

It definitely wasn't a steady job, there was even a time when he didn't have any income for more than a month. His footing was never truly stable. At first, he thought the fact that he didn't really belong anywhere was fine, but whenever he'd see a former classmate with a secure job, he'd feel anxious. It'd be a lie if he said he wasn't afraid of the future. But he knew he could never work at a job that required him to clock in at the same time every day.

The door of the bar opened as a couple of customers left. There was no one left in the dim bar but the members of their reunion party. There had been a man at the end of the counter just a short while earlier, but he was gone before they knew it.

The noise of the party became much louder and one man left the group. It was the man who'd been talking about his three kids. He waved to Masayuki from across the bar and staggered outside. The man who saw him off came back in and noticed the two at the counter. He gestured for them to come back and join the group.

"I'll be there as soon as I finish this," Masayuki raised his beer glass slightly.

"Taniguchi, don't you have to get home?" asked Kurokawa shyly.

"No, it doesn't matter," he replied, "Why?"

Kurokawa looked away and hung his head low.

"Isn't there someone waiting for you at home?"

"I'm single, I don't even have a girlfriend, so going back to my messy apartment every day and seeing my dirty laundry piling up makes me rather depressed."

"Well, I'm living with my parents."

"Oh yeah, you still live in your hometown, don't you, Kurokawa?"

The conversation stopped. Masayuki finished his beer and let out a big sigh.

"I'm thinking of going back in to join the party," he muttered to himself, rising from his seat. Just then, the silent Kurokawa suddenly spoke out.

"Taniguchi, there's something I've needed to tell you for a long time."

Masayuki's feet were already moving towards the group. He turned around, flustered.

"What?"

"... at the Iron Walk, do you remember?"

"Oh that thing where we had to walk for 30 kilometers? We were there in the same group, right?"

At the high school Masayuki attended, there was an event every autumn called the Iron Walk that the entire school had to participate in and which every student despised. Students would team up in groups of five and hike along a mountain path full of hills and valleys for almost an entire day.

In their senior year, Masayuki was in Kurokawa's group. There were two different hiking courses, one for the girls and one for the boys, so the groups were segregated by gender. However, in this particular senior class there were twenty-one boys, so if they split up into groups of five, there would always be one left out. Obviously, Kurokawa was always the one left. No group would offer to let him join in, nor would Kurokawa ever say he wanted to belong to someone's group. Seeing the poor boy slouched over with his long face, Masayuki felt sorry for him and had asked, "You want to join our group?"

"Man, that was tough. If I were asked to do it again now, I would totally refuse."

"Yeah."

Masayuki felt pinned by Kurokawa's intense stare, as though it were preventing him from going back to join the rest of the group, so he sat back down on his chair. As if he'd been waiting for that to happen, Kurokawa ordered his third cocktail. It was a gimlet.

"Are you okay with drinking that much?" The



fast pace of his drinking worried Masayuki. Kurokawa tilted his head somewhat sluggishly.

"Ill be fine. I've never had cocktails before, but they're very sweet and tasty."

"Those are the kind that get you later."

"Phillip Marlowe liked this drink, did you know that? I've always wondered what it tasted like. I never get the chance to have a drink with someone at the bar..." he muttered, smiling and oblivious, "Taniguchi, you drink a lot, too."

"I can handle quite a bit, but I prefer beer."

"Okay, then I'll have a beer next, too."

Just as he said it, Kurokawa chugged his cocktail. Even the bartender gaped at him in shocked surprise.

"What are you doing? If you do that, you can't savor the aftertaste."

"It doesn't matter." Kurokawa squinted his eyes, teary from the alcohol.

"I... back then, I... I was really happy that you, Taniguchi, invited me to be in your group for the Iron Walk."

Masayuki gulped uneasily. Even after over ten years, he still felt some sort of guilt. But Kurokawa didn't know. He didn't know that Masayuki severely regretted his casual invite almost immediately after he'd issued it.

Back then, Kurokawa was extremely lanky and was horrible at any sort of sport. He was less than useless during gym class, no matter what they did. His

weak exterior described exactly what he was inside, and as he'd started wheezing after only about one kilometer, Masayuki, who'd been walking beside him, had a bad feeling about what was about to come.

Because of the one turtle in their group, they were in last place at the five kilometer point. The Iron Walk rules stated that all members of a group must finish the race together. Since Masayuki was the one who'd invited Kurokawa the turtle, the rest of the group glared at him coldly, as if to say "How dare he let this one into our group!"

Every time Kurokawa fell behind, they had to stop, but Masayuki held back his irritation and called out to Kurokawa kindly. He kept wishing that Kurokawa would faint or something, even though he knew it was horrible to think such a thing- and then it actually happened. Kurokawa walked slower and slower, until finally, he completely collapsed. It was Masayuki who dragged him over to the shade under a nearby tree. While the other group members went to get the teacher in charge of first aid, he looked at the pale white face dappled by the shade of the wind-tossed leaves and felt a strange relief.

"I fainted during the race, didn't I?" Kurokawa said, "Taniguchi, it felt really nice while you were fanning me under the shade that time." He closed his eyes.

"For a long, long time... I wanted to thank you. But I never got the chance to do so."

After leaving Kurokawa with the teacher, Masayuki and the rest of the group started to walk again. They even talked about Kurokawa, "If he was going to faint in the middle of the race, he should have just sat out." None of them showed a sign of sympathy on their faces as they said those words. It wasn't something that had forever haunted Masayuki with guilt. But at the same time, it wasn't exactly a pleasant memory he hoped to avidly recall.

"Actually, I wanted to say it on graduation. But you left right after the commencement ceremony, so I looked for you all over school..."

After the commencement ceremony, Masayuki went up to the roof where no one could see him and cried for a little bit. The thought of not being in high school and of never again returning to that school building as a student had made him feel unbearably lonely and emotional. But to cry in front of his buddies would have been embarrassing and his pride would have never allowed it.

It was the beginning of March, with a crisp, brisk snap to the air. He lay on the cold concrete with the clear blue sky, empty of clouds, as his ceiling and closed his eyes. Before he realized it, he'd fallen asleep.

Something woke him from his shallow sleep; it was the sensation of being touched, of something touching his lip. He slowly opened his eyes. But there was nothing above him but the open sky. A soft voice called his name. He slowly got up. Kurokawa sat next

to him, knees drawn up to his chest, encircled by his arms. Finding that Kurokawa was intruding on his private sentimental moment kindled a spark of anger. Kurokawa managed to smile at him a little, despite the frightening glare Masayuki gave him.

"What are you doing here?"

"Nothing," he replied bluntly and stood up. He ran down the stairs without a backwards glance. Once he was home, he realized that touch had to have been a kiss. But no matter how hard he thought about it. He couldn't be certain it had been a kiss, because he hadn't actually seen it happen. He couldn't possibly ask Kurokawa. If he asked and it turned out he was wrong, he couldn't take the strange look he'd undoubtedly get.

There were two reunions after graduation. Since he was fond of parties, every time an invitation arrived, Masayuki went out of his way to get out of work so he could attend. However, this had been the first time Kurokawa had made an appearance.

"Isn't this the first time you've come to one of these?"

"Yeah," the man smiled brightly.

"You never show up for these get-togethers, what made you come this time?"

Kurokawa didn't answer, but instead ordered a beer. The bartender glanced over at Masayuki, then asked Kurokawa, "Are you going to be all right?"

"You should stop there," Masayuki tried to reason with him.

"Just one more beer," pleaded Kurokawa.

"Okay, just one more and then you have to stop," admonished Masayuki, seeing it was hopeless.

Red-faced, Kurokawa rested his chin on his hand and closed his eyes. Just as Masayuki wondered if he'd fallen asleep, the man let out a troubled sigh.

"...I wonder when it was, oh yeah, it was the beginning of November when I got the invitation to the reunion party. It said something about being the eleventh year after graduation and I remember being surprised that so many years had gone by already. I didn't have good memories from high school, so I thought I would give it a miss again this year... but then I changed my mind."

"I see."

The bartender set a glass of beer in front of Kurokawa. His thin but rough fingers took the glass and as though fascinated, rocked it back and forth to watch the foam rise and fall.

"I'm going to meet the woman I'm arranged to marry in two weeks."

"An arranged marriage?" Masayuki exclaimed.

"My parents told me I should get married before I turn thirty. Apparently, I am a 'late bloomer', so I wouldn't be able to find someone unless they arranged it for me."

"So if that all goes well, then this year will mark the end of your single life?" An arranged marriage seemed like exactly the sort of thing Kurokawa would do.

"I've been turning down the other marriage offers, but this time there were connections with my

father's job so it got pushed through. He said the least I could do is meet with them," Kurokawa stared blackly into his glass. Masayuki wondered why he would be so anxious about meeting someone.

"Even if you go to meet her and the matchmaker, you won't be forced to marry her or something. Just go and meet her, be casual."

Kurokawa rested his elbows on the counter, folded his hands and rested his head against them.

"I saw her picture, she was cute. She had no background problems at all. If I go and meet her and she ends up liking me and I have no objections about her, I won't have any reason to turn her down."

"Eh, don't think about it too hard. If you don't feel like the match will work, just make up a reason and turn them down. If you like her, you could always just date her for a while. I think marriage should be more of a spur of the moment type thing."

"I..." began Kurokawa. Then he suddenly grabbed his beer glass and in utter desperation, chugged the contents. He violently slammed the glass back onto the counter. It seemed like he might turn into an obnoxious drunk.

"Up until now, I've never made any decisions about school or work on my own. Everything was up to my parents or to other people... I was never independent. It's embarrassing to admit at my age. So if I listen to everyone else about marriage, I know I'll definitely regret it."

"Then you just have to find someone you won't regret."

"I'm not marrying," Kurokawa stated flatly.

"But you..."

"I'm not marrying. That's what I want."

In this world, there are millions of people all with different ways of thinking. But it came as a complete surprise to Masayuki that someone like Kurokawa believed in independence. Well, he did still live with his parents so he wouldn't have any problems with daily life, but what about his more primal needs? Would he have to live with just his right hand for a partner? That would be a bit depressing.

Kurokawa tried to order another drink after he'd finished the beer. Masayuki frantically tried to stop him.

"You promised you'd stop after this one! You're getting really drunk!"

Kurokawa slowly shook his head, "I'm not drunk, I can still speak."

"That's what all drunk people say. Even if you feel fine right now, think about what'll happen tomorrow. You won't be able to remember half of what we talked about tonight."

"But I won't be able to talk to you at all if I'm not drunk."

"But you are talking to me."

"I'm bad with words. Even in high school, we never talked like this. If I don't have a few drinks to loosen up, I'm too nervous to even say a word!"

Hearing the angry voice coming out of the seemingly-harmless Kurokawa made him jerk back involuntarily.

Kurokawa looked down sadly, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to raise my voice. Something just came over me... and..."

"Y-yeah, I understand."

Masayuki stared straight ahead, avoiding Kurokawa's eyes. The silence continued, but the bartender jerked his head to the side to get Masayuki to look over. When he did, he saw Kurokawa lying face down on the counter. Masayuki called his name, but got no response. He shook Kurokawa's shoulder, and the drunken man finally opened his eyes.

"You okay?"

Kurokawa groaned a bit, and then rubbed his eyes like a sleepy child.

With a laugh, Kurokawa murmured, "I'm so glad I came today, Taniguchi. I would never have dreamed of getting to talk with you like this. I'm so glad I grew up."

"Come on, stop saying weird things and shape up."

Still lying on the counter, Kurokawa started giggling.

"When I hear people talk, everyone says they want to go back to when they were in high school. It was great back then. But I don't want to go back... people are nicer to me now."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"You really think so?" mumbled Kurokawa. He suddenly grabbed the collar of Masayuki's sweater. If anyone had passed by at that moment, they would have thought the two were fighting.

Masayuki forced a response out of his constricted throat, "Y-yeah."

"Huh, well that's the first time we've ever agreed on something," sighed Kurokawa, sinking back down to counter top and releasing his hold on Masayuki's collar. Realizing the man was totally drunk, Masayuki decided it'd be best to get a taxi and send him home.

"Hey, Kurokawa, you should go home already. You're so drunk..."

"I'm fine."

Kurokawa's teary and bloodshot eyes belied his statement.

"I'll go with you part of the way, okay?"

Masayuki calmed him down and coaxed the drunken Kurokawa off the bar stool. As he teetered alarmingly, the rest of the drunken party-goers cheered his progress from the bar to the door, as Masayuki half-carried him out.

Despite the freezing temperatures, it wasn't snowing. It was easily past one in the morning, but the busy street was far from quiet and was clogged with endless lines of taxis and cars.

The drunkard walking along with Masayuki's support kept laughing in a small voice. White plumes of alcohol scented breath wafted over his cheek.

"Oh, that was great, I'm really glad I came. Oh, am I heavy? I'm sorry..."

If you're really sorry, you'd make an effort to stand on your own, thought Masayuki, though he didn't mention it out loud.

"I'm going to remember what happened today

for the rest of my life."

Masayuki smiled wryly to hear such a high-flown statement.

"What, that you got so drunk at a reunion that you were too wasted to even stand?"

"Not that. We were able to talk, just the two of us, Taniguchi. And we were able to be familiar, like old friends..."

"You're weird."

Kurokawa spotted a telephone pole and used it to prop himself up.

"I'm not weird at all. Let's say you admire a famous actress- someone you could never reach. Then out of nowhere, she sits down with you to have a drink. You'd be ecstatic!"

"But I'm not a famous actress, I'm not even a famous photographer."

"I know, but I still admired you. For a long time, I wanted to be just like you, Taniguchi. I wanted to be able to talk to you casually, make jokes, make you laugh, like the other friends around you. I wanted to be part of your group."

"You should've just told me."

"Impossible, I never could have told you."

A laugh escaped Kurokawa's lips on a puff of white breath. He hung his head.

"I have a morose personality and I'm terrible with words. I wanted to talk to you, but I didn't know what to talk about. I thought you'd reject me or that you wouldn't want me talking to you... I was scared."

"You were worried about that?"

Kurokawa smiled wryly at Masayuki's disgusted tone of voice, "You've never been picked on. You could never understand what I went through."

He couldn't reply. He felt as though Kurokawa were blaming him for not understanding. Masayuki scratched the back of his head.

"I don't think it's too late, though."

Kurokawa opened his eyes, and stared at Masayuki.

"If you have any problems or troubles, call me. It can be about work, or your home life, or anything. I'll listen to you vent. You don't even have to vent, it can be about anything. It's not too late. You can start over."

Kurokawa made a strange face, as though he didn't know whether to smile or cry.

"I'm incredibly tempted, but I'll pass," he said, slowly shaking his head from side to side, "Just being able to talk to you today is enough for me."

A taxi slowly approached the two men. The door popped open and Kurokawa ducked his head as he slid inside. Masayuki gasped as Kurokawa suddenly, frantically stumbled out of the taxi.

Masayuki dashed to the other man's side, "Did you forget something?"

Head low, leaning on Masayuki's arm, Kurokawa murmured, "I love you. I've always loved you and couldn't stand it. Even after we graduated high school, even after all these years, I still loved you."

Stunned, Masayuki could only gape silently at Kurokawa.

"Oh no, I said it. Isn't the power of alcohol

awesome?" Kurokawa smiled slowly. At that moment, two tears slid out of his eyes.

"This is so embarrassing. I'm so embarrassed. I'm so embarrassed, I wish I was dead. I hope we forget all of this tomorrow, you and me both."

Kurokawa slowly backed up and slipped into the taxi again. Masayuki watched the black taxi drive away, and stood staring long after it was gone, unable to move.

After he returned to the bar, the rest of the party was still in full swing, drunkenly carrying on. They were the only people left in the emptying bar, so Masayuki returned to the middle of the group and sat down. He turned to the man next to him.

"Did you get a business card from Kurokawa?"

The man tilted his head, "Kurokawa? Now that you mention it, I don't think I did. Hey, did anyone get a business card from Kurokawa?"

Everyone tilted their heads, thinking aloud.

"I didn't get a business card, but doesn't he work at the city hall or something? He said he commutes from home, so the address should be the same as when he was in high school..."

After that, the subject shifted from Kurokawa to another classmate who had recently divorced. Masayuki suddenly remembered a storage closet at his parents' house. After he graduated high school, all of his old belongings had been stored there by his mother. As he realized he'd have to go back there to dig out his class directory, he felt a bit faint.

"What about Kurokawa? Weren't you two talking at the counter this whole time?" asked the man next to him, breaking into his reverie.

"That's right, but..." Masayuki grinned, "He left something behind."

After eleven years of being cowardly and timid, Kurokawa had finally shown real courage. It was possible for a man to change. Somehow, he felt this very strongly.

"Forgot something, huh? He always was a bit scatter-brained."

Masayuki took the glass of amber-colored alcohol that they forced on him, and took a sip. He thought about calling Kurokawa. He was sure he'd be surprised to receive a phone call from a former classmate. Would he remember their drunken night together or not? Either way, Masayuki knew just what he would say when he was asked what the call was about.

"Hey, we had a great time at the reunion, didn't we? Are you free tonight? Let's go for a drink after work- I know a nice place."

Fin

The One I Love

There is probably no end to a human's desires.

Like a metronome, the windshield wipers swiped away the fine powdery snow, left and right. It was seven in the evening and since it was the middle of rush hour, there were dozens of cars in front of the train station. Even after the traffic light changed to green, it was very hard to move forward against the press of traffic. After two cycles, he was finally able to get through. There was a convenience store about fifty meters from the station and just as he parked there, a man approached the car.

The man put a silver-colored camera case into the back seat and got in on the passenger side. The crisp scent of the wintry air clung to his clothes.

"Sorry to make you come pick me up," Masayuki Taniguchi smiled. That was enough to make him blush. Embarrassed, he kept his face down as he replied, "No problem."

They were the same age, but Masayuki looked a bit younger than Kurokawa. Masayuki could throw on unique T-shirts or gaudy jackets that Kurokawa could never imagine wearing and he'd still look great. He never seemed to wear anything else but jeans. That is, Kurokawa had never seen him wear anything but jeans. So, maybe his younger look was because of his casual choice of clothes, though his way of making a living

probably contributed a little bit as well.

"Was it cold in Kanazawa?"

"It was really cold!" Taniguchi held his shoulders and pretended to shiver, "Plus it was only a one-day trip. It was really depressing to be at a hot spring in the snow while the model was in the warm water. I was standing there out in the cold shivering the whole time I was doing the shoot! I should have stayed an extra night to use the hot spring myself, even if I would have had to pay out of my own pocket."

The night before, an email from Taniguchi had arrived:

[I'm going to Kanazawa for a one-day trip. I'm free the day after tomorrow, so if you're free, why don't you meet me tomorrow evening?]

He'd immediately replied with a resounding "Yes!" The one nice thing about being a government worker was that there was very little overtime work. Even after work, he'd be able to get to Taniguchi's apartment within an hour. He'd always have to drive home, so he couldn't drink while they were out, but they could at least have dinner together.

"Man, I am so hungry. What d'you want to eat?"

"I'm fine with anything," he replied. Anything Taniguchi wanted to eat, he'd go along with.

"How about sushi?"

"Sure."

Pointing to a cheap fast-food-style kaiten-sushi

shop, Taniguchi said, "Let's try that one!"

Kurokawa blinked in surprise. Taniguchi must not have had much cash in his wallet. He was a talented photographer, but since he wasn't signed to a major company, his income was sporadic, to say the least. One time, Kurokawa stopped getting any emails from Taniguchi. They'd send text messages and emails on their cel phones every night, but then they suddenly stopped completely. Kurokawa panicked, thinking he'd been completely abandoned, and wasn't even able to go to work. When he finally couldn't take it anymore, he'd gone to Taniguchi's apartment only to discover his cel phone service had been turned off because of an unpaid bill- the paycheck from his publisher hadn't cleared in time.

"Man, I'd only had ten bucks in my wallet that time, and it had to last me an entire week! That was pretty depressing!" he smiled wryly, "I'm rich now, though."

If Taniguchi had mentioned the bill to Kurokawa, he would have helped him immediately, but that just wasn't Taniguchi's way. He kept quiet about it, and said nothing.

That's the type of man Kurokawa fell in love with; that sort of thing just defined who Masayuki Taniguchi was.

The car entered the parking lot of the sushi shop and he found a parking space. Taniguchi grabbed his wallet and rushed into the store. Kurokawa stumbled as he tried to hurry after him. He'd always seen this place advertised on TV commercials as a reasonably-priced

sushi joint, but it was his first time to ever actually set foot inside one.

Inside, it was brightly lit and had a cheery, family-restaurant atmosphere. Half the seats were filled with customers, mostly families. as if he was a regular here, Taniguchi took a seat in front of the counter. There were actually little plates of sushi riding along around the counter on a rail. Watching it go by made Kurokawa feel excited inside, just like a little kid.

"So I can just take whatever I want?"

Taniguchi blinked once, and said, "Yeah."

"Whatever I want, you say?" Kurokawa reached out and plucked a blue plate from the rail. Taniguchi burst out laughing.

"What, was it wrong to take this?"

"You're not going to start with that flan, are you?"

"But it looked so tasty..."

Taniguchi laughed and muttered, "You are so funny, you know?"

He'd used up a lifetime's worth of courage. With the help of some alcohol, he'd been able to spill out eleven years worth of his feelings.

During a class reunion last year, Yuichi Kurokawa had confessed his feelings to the man he loved. He'd fallen in love during high school, but ended up not being able to tell the object of his affections about how he felt even after they'd graduated. He believed that it didn't matter if it was with the same sex or the opposite

sex, there were many kinds of unrequited love in which a person couldn't confess their feelings. It wasn't like he was some kind of special case. The only difference was that in those eleven years, he'd never been able to fall in love with anyone else.

It had been the end of fall when the postcard had arrived. It was a standard invitation to a high school class reunion. He'd already checked off the "not attending" box on his R.S.V.P. card, but the words "Eleventh Year" caught his eye. He was surprised at how much time had passed since graduation. That night he took his old yearbook off the bookshelf. Below his gloomy picture was Masayuki Taniguchi's photo. As he gazed at the high-school version of Taniguchi, Kurokawa couldn't believe how good-looking his classmate was.

Masayuki Taniguchi was the object of much admiration. He wasn't especially smart or great at sports, but he was cheerful and fearless and able to make friends with anyone. To Kurokawa, this made Taniguchi an ideal person. Ever since grade school, he himself had been introverted, shy and terrible at speaking with others. In middle school, people had hated him for that and he fell victim to some nasty bullying. He'd had suicidal thoughts, but never acted on them once he graduated from middle school.

Kurokawa had wanted to do well in high school. He tried very hard to do well, but in the end, he couldn't make any friends. Nobody would pay any attention to him. No one would talk to him. Then he became afraid of people. Having people looking at him made him anxious. Talking to them was terrifying. He convinced

himself that even if he was able to talk to them, they'd never listen to him. There were forty-two people in his class, but he felt completely left out, as though he were some kind of alien creature.

Everyone ignored him. The only person who ever reached out to him in those troubled times was Taniguchi, whom he admired. Admiration blossomed into love during the Iron Walk. During a long distance hike for a school event, he'd fainted during the race. Taniguchi was the only one who took care of him. When Taniguchi fanned his face, it made Kurokawa wish that he could with him forever and he dreamed of how great life would be if they were the only two people in the world.

On graduation day, Kurokawa realized it was his last chance to thank Taniguchi for his kindness during the Iron Walk, so he searched all over the school. He finally found Taniguchi asleep on the roof of the school. He still didn't understand where he'd found the courage within himself to do something so bold. He'd kissed the sleeping man. In that moment, the past and present all disappeared until all that remained were Taniguchi and himself. But a world with just the two of them in it was only a figment of his imagination, after all, and as Taniguchi got up, he yelled at Kurokawa and went home. Maybe Taniguchi had noticed he was being kissed, or perhaps he just plain didn't like Kurokawa. At any rate, Kurokawa was treated so coldly and given such a withering glare that his heart was broken. He believed there was no hope. Even in college, even after starting a career, he couldn't make any friends. He never fell in

love with anyone else, either. There were always many people around him, but despite their presence, he was always alone. Seeing his yearbook, he tried to picture how Taniguchi would look, eleven years later. Trying to think what kind of adult Taniguchi had become made his heart pound. He desperately wanted to see his face, to meet him again.

He ended up taking some white-out and erasing the check mark by "not attending" and checked off "attending" in its place. When he went to send the R.S.V.P. card, he could feel his fingers trembling. The reunion was three months away, but he was already anxious for it to happen as he dropped the card in the mailbox.

On the day of the reunion, he had the guts to attend, but there were no classmates that would actually talk to him. There were a few people who came up and tried to make small talk, but the conversations didn't go anywhere. They had ignored him in the past, and it wasn't as though his bad feelings towards them had evaporated over the years, so perhaps they picked up on that.

At the final after-party, he was finally able to talk to Taniguchi. At first he could barely say anything, but after gulping down a few drinks, he was able to talk. Little by little, he was able to open up to him. He was finally able to thank Taniguchi for his kindness during the Iron Walk and get that off his chest. He should have stopped there, but in the end, helped by copious amounts of alcohol, he told Taniguchi that he loved him.

As he was leaving that party, something

struck him. He'd never be able to see this man again. His feelings would just swell inside him, and finally disappear. Taniguchi would definitely forget about him. Maybe he would forget everything that had transpired that night. Just thinking about it brought an almost unendurable pain. He wished that he could have even a tiny place in Taniguchi's memory- even a little corner would be fine. Even if he was only remembered as the crazy classmate that drunkenly confessed his love at an eleventh class reunion, that would be enough for him.

It was stone thrown with courage. He didn't expect it to make much of a ripple in his life. But suddenly, a week after the reunion, he received a phone call from Taniguchi.

"It's from a person named Taniguchi," his mother, who'd answered the phone, told him. He assumed it was one of his co-workers, who had the same last name. But when it turned out to be Masayuki Taniguchi, he was so surprised he thought his heart would jump out of his chest. The entire phone conversation was a blur, and truthfully, he couldn't recall any of it. But when he was done, he found he'd written a note with Taniguchi's current address, home phone number and cell phone number. After he hung up, he had to pinch himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

The year after that was like a shock wave that blew away the previous twenty-nine years of his life. The first thing he did was buy a cell phone. People were always shocked when he told them he didn't own one, but he'd never bought one simply because he hadn't needed one. But not knowing when Taniguchi would

call him made him realize he didn't want to miss those calls, so he finally made the purchase.

The second thing he did was move out of his parents' house and start living on his own. This was a huge decision. As he met with Taniguchi more and more frequently, the physical distance between them became a problem. They were in side by side prefectures, but it would take him two hours by car to get to Taniguchi's apartment from his parents' house. If he were to meet Taniguchi after work and then go home, it would take a total of four hours back and forth. He could only see Taniguchi's face for an hour or two at the most, and that wasn't enough to satisfy him. Fortunately, his workplace was closer to Taniguchi's apartment, so he rented an apartment in the opposite direction of his parents' house. This reduced his travel time to one hour each way.

Taniguchi was also a contributing factor to his move. He couldn't remember what they'd been talking about when Taniguchi had suddenly suggested he move out.

"Then everything will change for you. You can't wait around for change, you have to make change happen for yourself."

It may have been just a throw-away comment for Taniguchi, but it hit him hard, right in the heart. Over the next two months, he tried to convince his mother and was finally able to rent his own apartment. Just like Taniguchi had said, change started happening. He had to prepare his own meals and do his own laundry. He bought a washing machine, but the first time he used it, he put in so much soap the machine started spewing out

bubbles like a crab. Surprised by his crab-like washing machine, he'd called Taniguchi to ask if all washing machines worked that way, which caused his friend to laugh till he couldn't breathe.

Anytime he made a mistake, Taniguchi would repeat, "Kurokawa, you are so sheltered!" as though it were a mantra. At first, he really couldn't get the hang of anything, and worried constantly if he'd be able to survive on his own. But after a year had passed, he had forgotten that he'd even worried about it at all.

Changes didn't just affect his way of life. It became a little easier for him to talk to his co-workers. He had told Taniguchi that he was horrible with words and that he didn't have any friends to go out and have drinks with.

"It doesn't matter what you talk about," Taniguchi replied, "Just find someone and start talking to them." He tried to do as Taniguchi advised, but to no avail. Finally, he was set a quota: three times a day, he was to find someone and start talking to them about his personal life.

Since it was a promise he'd made to Taniguchi, Kurokawa tried his best. He tried to talk to the people around him, just casual chatting about the weather or how the day seemed to be going. For the first month, there wasn't any change, even when he tried starting conversations. But about two months after his quota was imposed, the girl sitting at the desk next to him started a conversation.

"That's interesting," she said, pointing to his keychain, "Is that a snake?"

"No, it's the Loch Ness Monster."

The girl tilted her head to the side and asked, "Loch Ness Monster?"

"My friend went to Scotland and brought it back for me as a souvenir."

"Oh, I didn't know Loch Ness was in Scotland... I thought it was in England."

"You know, my friend said something along those lines when he left to do a story there."

The girl leaned over and asked, "Mr. Kurokawa, what does your friend do?"

"He's a photographer."

Just then, the girl was summoned by the supervisor, so the conversation ended. It was a short conversation, but a huge improvement for him. To just have a regular conversation, naturally, without worrying or anxiety- something as trivial as that made him almost shake with joy.

Little by little, he was able to talk more with his co-workers. He'd get invited along when they went out drinking. Thanks to Taniguchi's advice, everything around him was changing at the most alarming rate.

It was then that he realized he was even more fascinated by Taniguchi now than he was eleven years ago.

After they finished eating their sushi, Kurokawa asked, "What should we do now?"

Taniguchi replied, "Let's just drive around."

The drove without any destination in mind, and Taniguchi, obviously exhausted by the day's travelling,

fell asleep in the passenger seat. He wasn't sure quite what to do, but finally Kurokawa drove back towards his apartment. If he brought him to his own apartment, Taniguchi might suggest they have a few drinks there, and then he wouldn't be able to drive him back home. Taniguchi had mentioned he was off the next day, so perhaps he might say he'd like to spend the night. Then he could be with him until morning...

As he drove slowly along, he glanced at the man sleeping peacefully next to him from time to time. They exchanged email almost every day, and went out to eat together whenever they had free time. But they weren't lovers, nor was there any discussion of that sort of thing. Last year, when he'd confessed his feelings, it was just in the hopes of imprinting himself on Taniguchi's memory; he had no idea what to do after that.

He thought confessing his feelings would be enough. He thought if he couldn't do that, just seeing Taniguchi one last time would be enough to satisfy him. But then... completely out of the blue, he'd gotten that phone call and they'd started seeing each other more often. He was talking with Taniguchi every day. They were going out to dinner together every week. It was just like a dream, a dream that had come true. But at the same time, he couldn't stop from thinking...

... How did Taniguchi feel about him?

When he'd confessed his feelings, he'd been drunk, but Taniguchi hadn't been. Knowing that Kurokawa had feelings for him, Taniguchi continued to associate with him as though that didn't matter in the slightest. But Kurokawa couldn't be sure if that meant

Taniguchi felt the same way or not.

Just seeing him, talking with him, meeting with him had been fine. It had been enough for a while. But now that Kurokawa could be with Taniguchi every day, he started to want more. He wanted to be more than friends. He wanted Taniguchi to be his boyfriend, he wanted to kiss him and hold him. But he was afraid to voice his desires. He was terrified that if he revealed this need, this want, their tenuous relationship would fall apart. If Taniguchi were to say "I don't want to see you anymore!", Kurokawa honestly didn't know what he'd do. That week when he hadn't gotten any email from Taniguchi, his worry had started to skid into delusion- he'd convinced himself that Taniguchi hated him and there was no reason to go on living.

Passion so great, so entangling that it could lead to murder; he'd seen cases like that on the news and never thought it could happen to someone like him. But now that he'd fallen into that whirlpool himself and been sucked into the current, he felt that he was capable of any sort of outrageous behavior. He could never have known this depth of emotion just from thinking "I love him" and staring at Taniguchi from a distance. Love magnifies loneliness, desire and longing, making them worse and worse. Love that is unrequited and one-sided makes those feelings double. Kurokawa desperately wanted to know how Taniguchi felt, but he was scared to even ask.

They drove through the downtown district, then onto a deserted highway. Kurokawa stopped the car on the shoulder, near a bridge. Taniguchi slept on,

oblivious. He slept like someone dead, and Kurokawa stared at him for a while. Presently, he leaned on the steering wheel and hung his head. What if he suddenly shifted the car into drive, stepped on the gas as hard as he could and drove the car through the guardrail and off the bridge? The bridge was really high, it was easily a sixty foot drop, so if they fell they'd both surely die. Then he wouldn't have to worry endlessly if this man loved him back or not.

It would take only a few seconds to shift gears and his foot was already on the gas pedal. But he didn't have the courage to do it.

"Hey, Kurokawa..."

He didn't know how much time had passed, but he raised his head at the sudden sound of Taniguchi's voice. The man in the passenger seat gazed at him with a worried expression.

"You seem ill, are you all right?"

"Oh, yeah..." he muttered. He couldn't possibly say that he'd been thinking about killing them both. His lips quivered slightly.

"Okay, then. It's pretty late. I was totally crashed out!" Taniguchi looked left and right, trying to see what was around them, "I can't see anything in the dark. Where are we?"

"I was taking us back to Kineshiro..."

Taniguchi grunted. He didn't ask why they were headed for their home town, or why they were stopped at such a weird place.

They continued the drive in silence. Kurokawa was finally getting used to talking with people, but he

suddenly felt he'd travelled back in time to high school, when he could never think of anything to say. Flurries of snow started to fall and the car heater roared softly. As Taniguchi vacantly stared outside, he saw two cars turn left right before the bridge, onto a narrow road with no traffic lights. He squinted into the darkness to see what was down the road, but all he saw was a faint orange light in the distance.

"I wonder if there's a love hotel over there..." Taniguchi muttered.

"A love hotel...?"

"They're usually by a river, that's the standard location."

Kurokawa accepted this at face value with a grunt of assent. He didn't really understand what Taniguchi was on about.

"Have you ever been to a love hotel?" Taniguchi asked.

Kurokawa's hands twitched slightly at the question, and he gripped the steering wheel tighter. He had dated a girl back in high school, but they'd broken up without even kissing. His only experience with physical love had been on graduation day when he'd lightly stolen a kiss from the sleeping Taniguchi. But, he was afraid if he answered honestly, he'd be laughed at.

"Yes, I have," he lied. Taniguchi stared at his face for a long moment.

"You're lying."

"How can you tell?!" Kurokawa demanded frantically, but Taniguchi just burst out laughing. No matter how many times he asked, Taniguchi just

laughed. Finally, Taniguchi got a hold of himself.

"Would you like to take a little field trip?" he asked, wiping tears of laughter from the corners of his eyes.

As Kurokawa drove along side the river, the love hotel came into view. He parked his car in the lot and went up the flight of stairs into the hotel. They were able to book a room and find it without anyone else seeing them, in traditionally discreet love hotel fashion. When they got into the middle of the room, Kurokawa froze.

The room was dimly lit, and about twelve feet by twelve feet. There was a bed on the right and a dark blue sofa on the left. Between the two, in a recessed alcove in the wall, was a large TV, game console and a karaoke machine with microphone. Kurokawa had expected something much gaudier, given that it was a love hotel, but it seemed like a regular business motel.

Taniguchi sat down on the sofa and took a beer out of the small refrigerator next to it.

"Don't just stand there, have a seat!"

Kurokawa awkwardly sat next to Taniguchi, who offered him a beer.

"But if I drink, I won't be able to drive us home..."

"Eh, since we're here, we might as well spend the night," replied Taniguchi, holding out the bottle. Kurokawa accepted it and took a sip. Immediately, his body felt a bit warmer and he felt himself begin to relax.

"So," asked Taniguchi, beer in one hand, "How do you like your first experience at a love hotel?"

"There's only one bed..." murmured Kurokawa.

Taniguchi's shoulders started to shake and he made a strange face as he tried to keep his laughter from escaping.

"I've never been to a love hotel with two twin beds. Anything else?"

"Anything else... Not really, it just seems really plain."

"I think this is what you usually get in these places. What were you expecting to see?"

"I don't know, something like a bed that rotates or a mirror ball on the ceiling..."

Unable to control himself, Taniguchi pounded the arm of the sofa as he laughed. Being laughed at for anything he said made Kurokawa feel sad and pathetic, and he felt he was about to cry.

"What era are you from? I guess you can find places like that if you look hard enough, but really..."

With that, the tears finally spilled over. Kurokawa hid his face.

"Hey! I'm sorry, hey, don't cry!" Taniguchi apologized frantically, "You just react so well to teasing, I can't help but poke at you. I'm really sorry." He gently stroked Kurokawa's hair, as though he were soothing an unhappy child. It was strange that such a small gesture could comfort him and make his sadness disappear like magic.

They turned on the TV, but since it was so late, there was nothing good on.

"Eh, why don't we just take a bath and go to bed?" sighed Taniguchi. He disappeared into the bathroom and Kurokawa heard the sound of running water. He realized that the person he loved was only a few feet away, naked, and he suddenly started to feel flushed and hot. An overwhelming urge to see the naked Taniguchi filled him. But fear of being considered a pervert if he were to burst into the bathroom stopped him from acting, though it didn't curb his desire to see...

Finally, he made up an excuse about needing to use the toilet and walked purposefully towards the bathroom door. The sound of running water continued. He reached for the door knob while vacantly staring at the smoked glass the partitioned the bathroom from the rest of the room. Suddenly, the bathroom door burst open, and he jumped in surprise.

"Oh, here you are! Great!" A fully-dressed Taniguchi grabbed his wrist and pulled him inside.

"The bath is pretty big, so we can both fit in it with no trouble..." While Taniguchi explained this, he pulled the baffled Kurokawa into the dressing area. Taniguchi immediately started to strip, and all Kurokawa could do was stare, completely dumbstruck.

"Take your clothes off," commanded Taniguchi, and Kurokawa complied, though in a daze. He'd just been hoping to see Taniguchi naked, but now, he was so rushed he fumbled with his own clothes, and couldn't even look in Taniguchi's direction. Suddenly, he was naked and struck with embarrassment, he stared at the floor as he was lead into the bathroom.

"Sit here," came the command.

He sat where he was told to, on the edge of the bathtub. He stared unblinkingly at the floor, and was completely surprised when his head was doused with warm water, followed by some cold liquid. Then his hair was rubbed vigorously as creamy white foam dripped onto the floor. The foam dripped on Taniguchi's bare feet in fluffy droplets.

"You know what? I've always wanted to wash someone else's hair," Taniguchi mused.

First, Kurokawa was dragged naked into the bathroom, next thing he knew, his hair was being washed for him. One thing led to another at lightning speed, and just like his shampoo covered hair, his mind was all mussed up and foamy. It was out of control.

"Isn't it just like you're in a salon?" asked Taniguchi.

"Uh... yeah..."

Kurokawa had never been to a salon, only a barber. But he guessed that fashionable people would go to a salon.

"You know, your hair is kind of cat-like. It's softer than it looks," Taniguchi washed Kurokawa's hair a bit more roughly than the barber did, then poured warm water over his head three times. He applied conditioner, rinsed again, and then that was the end of the shampooing. Taniguchi took Kurokawa's hand and helped him up from the edge of the bathtub, then sat in the spot he'd just vacated. He looked up at Kurokawa and smiled.

"Could you wash my hair now?"

The bathtub was spacious. Two adult men could fit in it and still have room to spare. However, there still wasn't room for them to be on either side and stretch their legs out, so Kurokawa sat with his legs to his chest, just as he used to in school. Taniguchi found some bath salts and swirled them into the water, turning it a milky white.

"It's so good to take a bath in a big tub," murmured Taniguchi, wearing a pleased expression and a washcloth on his head. "While I was at the shoot, I kept thinking to myself that I had to go and soak in a big bath. Come to think of it, have you ever been to a bathhouse before?"

"I've been to a hot spring..."

"A hot spring is similar, but bathhouses are great. There's so much life passing through them. I'll take you to one sometime."

"Okay," murmured Kurokawa.

Going to a bathhouse sounded like fun. However, he was worried about being there with Taniguchi, naked. This time, it wasn't a problem. He hadn't even gotten a chance to look at Taniguchi's naked body while they were stripping, and before he knew it, they were both deep in the bath of milky white water. When his hair was being washed, he'd only been able to see Taniguchi's feet and while he'd been washing Taniguchi's hair, he'd been so concerned about doing a good job, he hadn't even noticed they were both nude. Now, together in the tub, he could only see Taniguchi's shoulders because of the bath salts.

But the idea of going to a bathhouse together, a

planned trip, he was certain that he'd get overly excited at the prospect of seeing Taniguchi completely nude. In that kind of a state, there'd be no way he could even sneak a peek without getting an immediate erection. And how would that look, in a public bath, with no bath salt in the water to hide anything? He felt almost faint with embarrassment, just considering it.

Even now, looking at Taniguchi's wet hair, a drop of water running down his jaw line, and his relaxed face and half-lidded eyes made the heat rise in Kurokawa's groin. He kept looking down into the water so as to not look at Taniguchi's face.

He hated the fact that a man's desire took place in such a central part of the body. If that weren't bad enough, it was so obvious and blatant, impossible to hide. Splash! He felt some warm water on his face and on reflex, looked up to see a slightly moody Taniguchi staring at him.

"If you don't want to do it, just say so."

It took Kurokawa a few moments to realize Taniguchi was talking about visiting the bathhouse.

"Oh, no, I do want to go," he protested. Taniguchi splashed him again.

"You know, you always leave everything up to me to decide. I've never heard you say no, ever!" Taniguchi fumed, "I would much rather you tell me no straight up, than have you tell me yes with a reluctant look on your face. It's okay to say no! Just tell me what you're thinking! If you don't, I won't be able to understand you and I don't want to be dragging you around somewhere without even knowing you actually hate it!"

Kurokawa didn't even know how to reply, and couldn't stand to look Taniguchi in the eye, so he looked down again.

"Why can't you tell me?" Taniguchi demanded.

Kurokawa felt suffocated, his ears were ringing. Tears fell from his eyes, but unlike when he was being teased, Taniguchi didn't console him.

"It's okay to say what's on your mind, to say what you like or what you hate," continued Taniguchi, "We're all human, and all different, there are things that we're compatible with and things that we're not. That's normal." More teardrops fell into the milky white water.

"You're not a child anymore, so don't think people will understand you just because you're crying," Taniguchi admonished, "Use your words to communicate."

Kurokawa's lips quivered. But he had to speak, he couldn't bear to be yelled at again.

"I don't want you to hate me," he finally managed in a faint voice, accompanied by fresh tears. He closed his eyes and heard the water splash, then felt Taniguchi's body move closer to his. Taniguchi took Kurokawa's head in his hands and pressed his thumbs against his temples.

"If you are honest with me, I could never hate you."

After crying his heart out in the bath, Kurokawa felt as though a great burden was lifted off of his shoulders. Taniguchi left the bathroom first, followed

by Kurokawa a few moments later. Taniguchi, in the bathrobe provided by the hotel, leaned casually against the wall in the changing area. Embarrassed under Taniguchi's stare, Kurokawa kept his back turned as he slipped into his bathrobe. He tied the string into a neat bow as his waist and turned around. Taniguchi immediately grabbed his wrist.

"Sit here."

He was forced to sit in a steel chair in the changing area. Just as he wondered what was to come next, Taniguchi grabbed the hotel's blow dryer and started to dry Kurokawa's wet hair.

While he'd washed and dried Kurokawa's hair, Taniguchi seemed to be having a great time. He hummed a tune and his fingers moved busily. The front of his robe came undone and the edge of his nipple peeked out. Kurokawa quickly looked down, but couldn't resist the urge, and looked up again.

The whine of the dryer stopped. Taniguchi took Kurokawa's head in his hands and buried his face in his hair.

"Mmm. Smells good!"

The warm body against him, the light colored nipples, the fragrantly scented neck fresh from the bath; suddenly Kurokawa couldn't take it anymore and he threw his arms around the man in front of him.

"H-hey!"

Kurokawa didn't let go when Taniguchi frantically backed away. It was as if Taniguchi couldn't hold up the weight of two people, and they tumbled to the floor, Kurokawa's face pressed against Taniguchi's chest.

"Calm down, Kurokawa! Hey..."

Now that Taniguchi was in his arms, he didn't know what to do next. Pinned beneath him, Taniguchi let out a sigh and muttered, "Shall we take it to the bed?"

For the first time in his life, Kurokawa was in an intimate situation with someone he loved. He was naked, his partner was naked, and there were two bathrobes lying on the floor in wrinkled heaps. Taniguchi's skin, now close enough to easily touch, was warm. But it didn't seem real. He kept thinking it was some kind of dream he'd conjured up, because right before they'd entered the love hotel, he'd been considering suicide.

After they'd gotten into the bed and kissed, Taniguchi pronounced him a bad kisser. Kurokawa did exactly as Taniguchi instructed and used his tongue. It was more exciting than anything he'd ever felt during his furtive masturbation sessions; he felt chills running up and down his spine. He knew about French kissing from movies, but had never imagined the inside of his mouth could be an erogenous zone.

It was like a dream and he was light-headed, but there was no denying that he and Taniguchi had sex. He lay on top of his sleeping partner and kissed his hair. After they'd finished, the feeling of joy overpowered any other feelings, feelings of excitement or embarrassment. He was blissfully happy, happy, happy.

"Mmm..." Taniguchi shifted a bit and opened his eyes, "What time is it?"



"It's just now nine in the morning..."

He hugged Taniguchi from behind and squeezed him tightly. Taniguchi sighed.

"Mm, my back hurts," he mumbled, "We should have been a little more careful before we started going at it, should have gotten me a little more prepared."

Kurokawa was stung by this complaint.

"But it went in..."

"Yeah, well, I made sure it would. You're not supposed to just stick it in. I want to feel good too, it's not fair that you got all the fun."

"Sorry," Kurokawa apologized, unable to disagree. Taniguchi stopped complaining and yawned, then blinked his sleepy eyes.

"It's so quiet..."

"Yeah..."

"You're kind of crushing me... could you maybe not squeeze quite so tightly?"

Sadly, Kurokawa did as he was told and loosened his grip. He felt Taniguchi's fingers touch his wrist, a light pat. It was as though he was trying to tell him it wasn't that he didn't like being held, just that he didn't need it to be so tight.

Suddenly, Kurokawa realized that Taniguchi probably did love him back. He loved this man, and maybe this man loved him back. They had sex. He was so happy that they did, but now he needed to know how Taniguchi felt.

"Um, hey..."

Eyes closed, Taniguchi asked, "What?"

"What do you like about me?"

Taniguchi opened one eye and glanced at him. But he remained silent. Wanting a response, Kurokawa stared at him until Taniguchi grunted.

"Don't stare at me so much."

"How come you fell in love with me?" Kurokawa asked the same thing again.

Taniguchi's ears turned red.

"I dunno."

Kurokawa persisted, demanding over and over again to be told. Finally, Taniguchi shook him off his back with a yell.

"It's because you can't do anything!" he sat up slightly, and muttered, "You can't do anything, don't know anything. It makes me think that I need to show you the way!"

"In bed, too?"

Suddenly Taniguchi leaned on top of Kurokawa. Before Kurokawa could react, Taniguchi's face was very close and a kiss was planted on his lips. It was rough, but very kind.

After they kissed, Taniguchi finally admitted defeat.

"I wanted to do it, too," he muttered, "You got a problem with that?"

Fin

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing *Cold Sleep*. I think there are people who collect the novels, as opposed to reading the serialized story in the anthology magazine, so I would like to add some details. This was the first of a three-part series that ran in the anthology. In other words, this story is just the beginning. The following episodes will be published after a brief pause, so it would be great if you would continue reading the next story as well. To me, all of the stories together make up one book.

When I first started writing this story, there was a song that I liked very much. I would draw my inspiration from that song, but since it was the end of the story that the song inspired me to write, it took me a whole year just to flesh out my story so it would reach that ideal ending. So while I was writing the rest of the story, that song which was popular back then didn't come on as much... well, that's fine with me, but it just moved me to think how long a series it was. I'm not very good at writing a long series, so it turns out to be two books, it feels like I worked on a full-length novel. In truth, it isn't much material though.

As the episodes were collected into the novel, I had asked Ms. Nanawo Saiga to draw the illustrations for me. I liked the way Fujishima's

crying face was wonderfully drawn in the anthology, but Ms. Saiga's renditions of the two main characters are very beautiful as well. It's amazing that she makes the two muddy characters seem so translucent and beautiful. It's as if a cool breeze passes through the story... The two will change little by little. I hope you read the next episode.

To my editor, honestly, I'm slightly doubtful if I can produce the next episode. (laughs) But if it were to be published, I would like to conclude this story in a different way. While I was working in the anthology, often times I would be forced to quit because of time constraints. But this time, I will revise it more, then add some more... It may turn out to be a very daunting task, but please bear with me.

To everyone who always reads my stories, I really appreciate your support to collect the stories from the anthology in novel form. I was hoping I could put in more novel-only new material, but since there wasn't very much time between this story and the next one, I decided to include "Dousoukai (Class Reunion)" instead. The new material came after "Class Reunion". I never imagined I would get a chance to write about what happened after "Class Reunion", but I was surprised that I had no trouble writing it. I wish it was always this easy! I tried to collect as many different stories as I could; I hope you enjoyed it.

Finally, to my friend, I believe I only talked about the plot for the final part of the ending with you. If it comes true, it would be scary, yet funny...

Anyway, if this story is published, I would love you to read it from start to finish and tell me what you think of it.

Until we meet again in the next book...

November

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